

Fallen Angel



Sandra Faella

Fallen Angel

All rights reserved © 2003 Sandra Faella

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in Canada by Double Dragon eBooks, a division of Double Dragon Publishing, Markham, Canada.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



ePublisher:
Double Dragon eBooks
a division of Double Dragon Publishing
PO Box 54016 1-5762 Highway 7 East
Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 CANADA
<http://double-dragon-ebooks.com>

Cover design by Deron Douglas
ISBN: 1-55404-019-1
First Edition eBook Publication January 23, 2003

FALLEN ANGEL

by

Sandra Faella

Chapter 1

~ Visits ~

She stared through the window. The naked limbs of the trees were lightly covered with the snow that had fallen the night before. The branches reached toward the warmth of the sun that crept out of the gray clouds. Erratic in its temperament, the wind could be heard roaring against the window. Her steps echoed down the bitterly cold hall. The floor reflected the window's wintry scene like a mirror. Looking down at the surface she saw a familiar face. She bent down and touched the marble. It was absurd: a vain effort to wipe the tears off the cheeks of the young woman staring back at her. *Cold. Ice cold.* Her fingertips retracted, rubbing together. Her hair hung down in wild tendrils brushing the ground. Standing up, she pushed it back with both hands. She remembered what her mother had always said concerning her unmanageable mane.

"If you're going to defy my wishes and keep it that long, please, do something with it."

Her mother had always styled it when she was young. Braids, curls, elaborate creations. Her hair was either complimented or looked at strangely. A six-year-old girl decorated with a changing head of hair. Her mother would scan fashion magazines for women from different eras and would make her head an exact copy of whatever her daughter fancied at the time. Whether a bouffant or flips, that hair always brought attention. It was dress-up every day. Her mother did it as much for herself as for the whim of an eccentric daughter. By 12 years of age she preferred to wear it straight down and sometimes unkempt.

"Why do you have to hide your face all the time?" Her mother would pull it back, only to watch her daughter brush it forward.

It was her one act of defiance. Looking back, she couldn't remember doing anything else disobedient. Her hair became her comfort and security, the way it rested against her back. Now, in the frigid hall with her arms folded, she pulled at a lock on her forearm; a habit her mother had hoped she would stop. She reached the halfway point and needed to walk nine more steps. *Short steps. One, two, three, four, five.* Slow steps she took once a week over the past six months. *Six, seven, eight, nine steps. Turn to the left.*

She looked straight ahead and her mother's name stared back, chiseled in a beautiful granite stone. Sarah Dumas 2323-2368. She saw her reflection distorted in the intricate detailing. She traced the name with her finger. *Sarah Dumas.* She always loved the way her mother recited their last name. The phony, French accent always made her smile. It had been a long time between smiles. Her forehead pressed against the stone. The cold soaked through her bones...into her brain. Whispering to her mother, she tried not to create a huge echo.

"Hi, Mom. Can you believe it? Snow in sunny Florida. I was supposed to come yesterday, but I had one of those creative explosions. I finished the painting. Think you would have liked it. It's the angel you saw toward the end. The one you described the night you..." She stopped, her chest heaving. "I didn't want to tell you about it 'til I finished it. Of course, you were probably watching me the whole time. At least, I hope you were. I had the hardest time with the eyes. You hadn't told me what color they were. Blue was appropriate in the end. It sounded so sad when you explained it to me...I tried to express that through the eyes...like the colors of the sky when there are only a few clouds, but you know in an hour it's going to be raining. Took me a while to get the colors right. In the end I had to go through 10 canvases and two gallons of oils."

She paused remembering those torturous hours that resulted in disaster and led her to start from

scratch. It had taken a while before she had hit that groove of creativity with this particular subject.

"I don't know what else to tell you. The week's been fine. Got a new project from Agnieszka on Tuesday. They think it's the original 'Olympia' by Manet. I have my doubts, but it has been missing for quite some time. The chance of it being found in the basement of a Toronto apartment building is ludicrous, but stranger things have happened. We'll see. That'll keep me busy for a few months. Oh, and I'm thinking of taking Cat up on her offer to stay at her apartment. I know, it's stupid, but I don't want to be alone in the house anymore. I hope you're OK with that. She misses you and sends her love."

She stepped back and wiped away the tears with both hands, cradling her head. *I miss you, Mom. I hope you're okay. I hope you're not in pain, but I wish you were still here...even if you were hurting. I know that's selfish, but I don't care.* The thoughts ran on in her mind. Over and over. Coming here was hard. She always walked away much faster.

"I love you."

Leaving the crypt and heading toward the transport, she held her light fall coat around her neck. It was so strange, this weather. The last time it had snowed in Verona she was six. The door to the transport 'whooshed' shut. She wanted to get out of this place, but didn't know where she should go. Home was not good. Cat was on another tour. Aggie was working, as always. *No one around.* A thought occurred. *Perfect time.*

She made the transport aware of her destination and off it went. Twenty minutes later the black vehicle was on the other side of Verona. The sky changed to a more ominous gray. Mother had warned her not to visit Jit alone. Since Mom had passed, there was no one in Verona who could accompany her. No one else knew and if they were made aware of the situation no one would bother. The harsh truth was no one would care.

This part of Verona was antiquated. The technological revolution had passed it by. There were hundreds of slums like it littering the landscape of the United States. Mother had made her aware of this. It was just another place that had been abandoned by the government and its 'honorable' citizens. They were neglected refugee camps for outcasts of one form in particular.

She passed a 24-hour laundromat, its front window cracked. The spot where the door should have been was exposed. The last time she visited Jit it was intact, as intact as a building could be in this part of town. There was trash everywhere. The wheels of the transport bounced against the decaying streets. The vibrations suggested she should take manual control of her transport. There was a good chance the automatic would go haywire due to the unreliability of the satellite signal.

Bars, mini-marts, row homes, were all in disgraceful states. Only one abandoned transport was parked near a curb. It looked 30 years old, rusty and without windows. A cat sprang out of the passenger side and sprinted across the street. She thought she spotted a fishtail in its jaws. These were common sights. Another woman might have been so disoriented she would have stopped in the middle of the road. She would have headed back to the highway. But this was commonplace for her. The silence and desertion did make her uneasy. She knew ops were in these buildings. Sleeping, drugging, whatever would pass the time until they could move around at nightfall. Mother had explained that it was too dangerous to visit Jit after sunset.

A guard transport made its way across another street heading west. Its horn went off, alerting everyone of its presence. She hoped she hadn't been spotted. The last time she attempted a visit she had been questioned. She made up an excuse about getting off at the wrong interstate exit. The thoughtful escort home messed up her plan of visiting Jit that afternoon. This time she would be spared an inquisition. The guards kept moving.

Her transport turned a corner and parked in front of a house similar to the many others. Blue paint was peeling and a few windows lacked glass. Gray plastic covered the openings. The wood porch looked as if the slightest breeze would cause it to collapse. She blared the horn once, twice, three times. A minute later, the front screen door creaked open and a tall, slender figure appeared. He smiled and ran to the transport. She got out and welcomed his embrace. He led her inside.

Jit was a foot taller than she was. His stringy, dirty blond hair fell in front of his face, hiding his slate, gray-specked eyes. His jaw was prominent and well defined. His chin jutted out and leaned to the left just a bit, making his face look off balance. A small, pointed nose rested above two pouty lips.

Conversation was held on her end. Jit offered her a seat at the kitchen table consisting of an old teacher's desk and some lawn chairs. He placed a glass of water in front of her and sat down. He looked excited. She glared at the few black grains floating around in the drink. Not wanting to know what they might be she moved it away from her. Jit didn't even notice. He was wrapped up in his need to communicate. His excitement caused him to sign too quickly for her.

"Hold on, Jit. Not as fast as Sarah was." Her hands moved with the words.

Jit's head rolled back in silent laughter. His mouth opened revealing the tongue, which had been horribly mutilated. She had cringed the first time she had seen that. Anger boiled in her when, at 10 years of age, her mother explained that all males received this procedure when they were born into society. *Our society...*

It had been an ordinary night. She expected her mother home from work at 5:00 and was finishing the dinner preparations. Soup and salad. She could remember the smell that was in the kitchen that night. Tomato, garlic, and onion coupled with oil and vinegar. Just as the dinner was laid out on the table she heard a loud bang from the living room and her mother yelled for her. Running into the room, she witnessed her mother in the doorway, gripping this small figure in her arms. She screamed for her daughter to get some towels, the first-aid kit, and clean clothes. She froze in terror. Her mother placed the limp body on the couch. She regained herself as she looked at her daughter.

"Samantha, honey, please go get them for me. We have to help this boy."

Boy. That word pounded in her brain as she ran up the steps to the bathroom to find the supplies. When she made her way back downstairs she saw her mother bent over the figure crying.

"Why do they have to do this?"

She placed everything near her mother's feet. "Who mom?"

"All of them."

Sam stared down at the body. The male was no older than she was. There was blood and mud smeared on his face. Some blades of grass stuck to his left cheek. It was impossible to tell what color his hair was for the same materials infected his scalp. Her mother took off his shirt, revealing a huge gash on his chest. His skin was pale except in a few areas that were covered with purple and gray bruises.

"Is he dead?" Sam sat on the coffee table, watching her mother inspect the wound.

"Almost."

She helped her mother. Getting water and more towels and placing the boy's clothes in the washer. When her mother had done all she could she carried him upstairs and placed him on her bed. She watched over him the whole night. Sam fell asleep at the foot of the bed. She didn't want to leave her mother alone with this strange being. She awoke the next morning to a strange sight. Peering over the foot of the bed, she saw her mother moving her hands in unusual gestures. The young boy was watching her. They would take turns. He would do patterns with his hands and she would watch. Sam

watched this, unseen. The boy turned to her and smiled. She waved awkwardly. Her mother motioned for her to approach.

"Ajit, this is Samantha, my daughter."

Sam walked behind her and whispered in her ear. "Mommy, what are you doing?"

"It's called signing. I'm talking to Ajit."

"But why do you have to move your hands?"

"You make words with your hands."

She looked at the boy, who was staring out the window. "How old is he?"

Ajit put both hands in front of him, spacing his fingers.

"Ten?" Sam asked. "You can't talk?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Samantha, go downstairs and give Cil a call. She should still be at the gallery. Tell her I need her to get over here as soon as possible, tell her it's an emergency. But don't tell her about Ajit. We don't want anyone to know, OK?"

"Is he in trouble?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing, except be in a place that people didn't want him to be. Now go and do as you're told." Her mother ran her fingers through her daughter's curls.

"Yes, Mommy."

In the present, Jit was going on and on about his news. Sam could hardly believe it.

"When are you leaving?"

He pointed to the calendar on the wall.

"Saturday. This Saturday?"

He explained that Sarah had given him enough money to allow him to get out. She knew he wouldn't be able to maintain an existence for very long without her to watch over him. Europe was a much better place for an op. Cil had arranged the trip since regular plane travel was out of the question. He joked that he would be able to find a woman overseas who would find him intriguing and mysterious.

"Strong, silent type?" Sam said, smiling. "You know, you can stay with me."

Jit scowled at her. He knew, as well as she did, that it would get her in trouble and him in custody.

Sam blurted, "I'm going to miss you."

He signed, repeating the phrase.

"Who am I going to watch movies with and talk to about stupid things? You're the only male I know."

He signed.

"Don't say those things. It's not your fault you're that way. You are a whole man. A wonderful person. And someone will see that...and love you completely. Like Sarah did."

He smiled and looked out the window. She headed for the door.

"I'll visit again before you leave."

Jit shook his head and told her it wasn't safe. He had last minute preparations and he didn't want any guards to become suspicious. He hugged her and kissed her cheek.

"I'm not going to see you again?"

Jit shrugged his shoulders and signed.

"I love you, too."

She ran off the porch. Safely in the transport, she turned on the radio. Her eyes filled with tears as she watched her friend retreat from the screen door, into the blackness, gone from view.

Cat walked out of the bedroom. "Sam, have you seen my keycard? Sam?"

Sam was looking out the bay window, her waist length hair pulled back in a ponytail. Cat walked up behind her and pulled it.

"Hey!" Sam whipped around and assumed a defensive position.

Cat grinned. "My keycard. Have you seen it?"

"I put it on the counter. Found it under the bed again."

"If I go through another one, Sue is going to kill me."

Sam sat on the sofa. "Not a very good sign of a stable relationship, losing your lover's keycard all the time."

Cat headed to the fridge for some juice. Her black, neck-length hair bounced in tempo to her steps. Sam marveled at how she moved. Like a cat. The dancer in her shone through every graceful movement. Cat was a beautiful, nymph of a woman. Funny, outgoing, and running on all cylinders, she was a personality magnet. Her almond-shaped eyes radiated heat and energy and made it clear there was no way of fooling her. She and Sam could have conversations with very few words, but everything expressed. Most of it through those eyes.

"Cat, I think I'm ready to go back."

"Are you sure?" She placed a glass from the cabinet down on the counter.

Sam nodded. "It's time. Besides, you've got a life of your own and I'm just getting in the way here."

"You're not in the way."

"Well, I feel like I am. And you've got the theater tour coming up. I'm going to be by myself anyway...might as well be at home where I belong."

"You won't be by yourself." Cat grabbed the remote off the table and accessed the message screen.

"Got this last night when I came in, didn't want to wake you."

As Sam watched the screen, a familiar face appeared.

"Hello, sweet Sammy, how are we this evening?" Cil was wearing a bright red blazer that matched her hair.

"It's an improvement from the mauve wig," Cat muttered.

Sam motioned for her to keep quiet.

"Cat, darlin', I hope you're well. Just calling to check in." Cil's southern drawl caused both of them to

giggle. "I'll be on retreat for a week, so I won't have access to VC. I have some good news. The Vinto Gallery Art Tour has been canceled. Well, it's not good news for me, not enough public interest." Her hand flew up in front of her face, waving away a thought. "I'm going to be heading to Florida for some acquisitions in a month. I'll be in the vicinity of Verona for two weeks and insist on making a pain of myself by staying at the house. I'll talk to you soon to discuss the arrangements. I love you, Sam. Take care. Bye, Cat."

The screen turned blue and asked if the message wished to be saved. Sam hit the 'yes' button.

Cat said, "Just what you needed, a crazy person running around your house unsupervised. That's as good of a reason as any to move back."

Cat hit another button on the remote and the news appeared. She finished preparing her juice breakfast in the kitchen.

Sam called, "If it's all right with you, I'll drag my stuff out of here this weekend."

"Oh, that'll be perfect. I've got Saturday off so I can help you." She brought two juice glasses back to the sofa. "I don't want you to think that you're ever an inconvenience, OK? I wouldn't have asked you to stay here if I didn't want you. You know that. I love having you around. You were alone in that house for too long."

"I know. But every time I go back to check in I have this itch, like it's time."

Cat placed her hand over Sam's and squeezed. It was settled. Cat's attention turned to the screen.

"Oh, look."

The headline next to the newscaster read RAPIST in bright red letters.

"It must be about the op in California. The one they caught last week."

The newscaster began. "The arraignment of the alleged serial rapist of 10 women in Los Angeles began today, April 13, in the Los Angeles City/County Courtroom Building. Sixteen-year-old Alistair was led in through the back entrance, hands and ankles cuffed, surrounded by guardians wearing bulletproof gear."

A picture of the young male flashed on the screen. Everything about him gave the impression he'd been living in dumpsters since the day he was born. His eyes stared into you. But they were cold, unemotional. Sam could see Cat shiver from the corner of her eye.

"Threats on Alistair's life have been coming in at the retention building where he has stayed for the past week in Santa Monica. Hundreds of citizens stood outside the courtroom carrying picket signs, demanding justice for the heinous crimes Alistair is accused of committing. The one question on everyone's lips is how this young male managed to be given the opportunity to commit these acts in the first place."

The screen shot was of a bunch of women picketers by the signs. Sound bites began.

"How this op was allowed to walk the streets uncastrated is beyond me. What does that tell you about the safety of this city?"

"He's an animal and he deserves to be put in a lot of pain and killed."

"All I can think about are those women. They were brutalized and now could find out they are positive."

"California's laws gotta change. We're one of the only states that doesn't have mandatory castration."

"This is a wake up call."

"They need to stay underground like the rats that they are."

"Efforts to treat these males with some humanity are ridiculous. Look at what they've done. We don't need to revert to that. They've proved themselves to be useless."

The newscaster continued, "Representative Laura Atwood feels it is time to take care of the situation before it becomes out of hand. In a press conference today she promised to make sure the appropriate laws are passed to prevent another devastating tragedy: 'The State of California has managed to get through 30 years without one single reported rape by a male. We should not let this one instance scare the entire population. This may be just what the House needs in order to move quickly on passing the appropriate laws to prevent this from happening again.' Prosecutors feel confident that enough evidence will be provided to guarantee a criminal trial. One that will lead to the conviction of Alistair and a death penalty. This will prove a long and arduous task."

The monitor turned black. Sam held the remote in her hand for a long time.

"God, it's so awful." Cat finished her juice and grabbed both the glasses.

"That Atwood..." Sam began.

She wondered if Ajit was safe. Cat knew nothing about him. Keeping him a secret had been one of the hardest things for Sam. Only Cil knew about him now.

"She's a hell of a woman, that's for sure. Doesn't take any shit." Sam heard the glasses clink together in the sink. "Well, I'm off. You heading into work today?"

"Not 'til 2:00."

"Whose turn is it to cook?"

Sam pointed at Cat. "I'll pick up something on the way home."

She ran out the door.

Let's see if she remembers. I'll give her to the count of five. One, two, three, four...

The door opened. Cat didn't make eye contact with Sam. She walked to the counter, grabbed her keycard, and headed back out the door. Sam was about to open her mouth when she heard Cat in the hall.

"Don't even start, Sam."

Chapter 2

~ Memory ~

The move back only took an hour of Cat's time Saturday. She decided the two of them should go to the beach that afternoon. It didn't interfere with the relocation operation. Sam had been living a nun's life the past 10 months; something she was ready to change.

"I'm thinking of throwing a party for Cil." Sam leaned on the window of the passenger side of Cat's vehicle. "What do you think?"

"Bout time you got festive. That'll be just before I head off for the tour." Cat turned the key in the ignition. "We can discuss the details next week."

Sam walked into the house. All the lights were on, even though it was noon. She made herself a sandwich, then went on-line for a bit checking messages.

Chiletia, working in Guatemala, e-mailed her about the discovery of the Uccello found in Tuscany, asking for her opinion on its authenticity. *Does the woman ever not think about art?* Checking the newsgroups disgusted her lately. Everyone was talking about the California rape trial. Sam had so many conflicting opinions she decided the best thing would be to avoid it altogether. After an hour of sifting through information she watched a movie. She popped in one of the discs from a blacklisted on-line store. It wasn't yet illegal to purchase films with males in them, but at the rate representatives like Atwood were going it wouldn't be long before her shopping days were over. However, she already had close to 500 movie classics.

Her mother had taken 10 films from her when she was 13, threatening to throw them all away. Sam remained calm that day she had found them missing from her closet. She waited. A week later her mother returned them and lectured her about the merchandise. Sam assured her it was curiosity and she wouldn't buy any more. And sure enough, no more discs were found. They were in Sam's safety deposit box. One she had asked Cil to get for her.

"Every woman needs secrets," Cil said, when Sam handed her the key.

So, every Friday night when mother hosted an art exhibition, Sam would head over to the bank. She would withdraw one disc and watch it over and over 'til she heard the transport drive into the garage around 2:00 AM. Sometimes Cat would stay over. She would look at the screen, her face in a frozen state of mortification.

"How can you watch this stuff? It's disgusting."

"You're not even trying to understand."

"Why would I want to?" Cat shoved her face into a pillow. "Turn it off!"

It became a standard routine. Even though she didn't approve, she never told Sam's mother. That was something that would always endear Cat to her. Though she had strong opinions she never forced them on Sam. She loved that about her.

The movie Sam was watching was 'The Long Hot Summer', starring Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward. It was one of her favorites, all that sweat and heat. Sam felt she could smell Mr. Newman right through the screen. He had beautiful eyes. They looked like crystals. They drilled themselves into whomever he was staring at, especially women. Ms. Woodward was one lucky lady. Imagine getting to stare at something like that. That blue reminded Sam of a project that needed to be finished. She headed up to her studio and walked over to her easel. Her mother's angel. She opened a jar of

fixative and searched for a large brush. Don't want this to get ruined. Almost six months. Should have remembered this sooner. She threw her old smock over her clothes and began applying the clear solution over the oils. She realized why she had waited so long. It took her back to the night in the hospital. She was in so much pain. She didn't want any medication. Wanted to be aware of everything. She'd sketched the angel's face that morning. She woke up at 3:00 AM and didn't stop 'til she got it right. Said it would be a nice thing for Cil for her birthday.

Sam stared at the sketch next to the painting. A perfect symmetrical visage with eyes shut, as if in repose. She knew it was her last night. She dipped the brush in the jar, slowly going over the beautiful white and gold feathers. His wings...she kept saying how magnificent his wings were...how they looked strong enough to carry someone with him. She had modeled the angel after a statue entitled 'Nike of Samothrace'. Strong, outstretched wings replaced the arms. Ancient-looking material flowed around the hips and legs, wrapping over one winged shoulder and exposing most of the chest. The hair flowed in back of the angel's head as if caught in an updraft. He pushed forward into the darkness. The background was various shades of blue. It was as if the angel had flown from a void in space to take her mother. She could hear her mother's voice as she finished the seal.

"He was very tall...to have such a small frame...like he would have to struggle against the least little bit of...wind." Every time she struggled for breath her grip would tighten.

"Mom, please, you need something." Her eyes were red and raw; too many tears had fallen that night.

"I have to finish...it's important. He was so beautiful. I'd never seen anyone so beautiful, but he never opened his eyes." She groaned in pain.

Sam couldn't take it any longer. "I'm calling a nurse."

A half-hour after the medication took effect her mother was speaking nonsense. "Defending men...Cil said that's what he came to do...defend men...that's why he's called...he took me...showed me...asked why I had left him for so long. I told him I couldn't stay...told him you needed me. Sam...different world...he said he loved me."

Sam didn't want her mother in any more pain. "Yes, mom."

"You know I love you...you know you're everything. Don't you?"

Through sheer exhaustion the tears came again. "I know. I love you so much."

She wrapped her arms around her mother's stomach. She smelled the antiseptic. It was so foreign. She always remembered her mother smelling of lilac. Her mother stroked her hair.

"My baby."

Sam forced herself to remain awake. Then her mother's final words slipped out.

"Be you, Sam...be you."

A half-hour later Cil was there. She stayed in the room the rest of the night.

Be me. Like I know what that is. She stood back and admired her work. Must be a real angel. Like the perfect merge of man and woman. Mom kept saying 'he' and 'him'. Didn't think that there were any male angels left. Surely the female angels have thrown them out of heaven by now. Friend of Lucifer maybe? Defending Men. The face reminded her of the statues and paintings she had seen of gods. Epitome of perfection. I hope the eyes are right. That blue. Stand back, Mr. Newman. She laughed. She placed her mother's sketch in the drawer and opened the studio window, allowing the room to air out. I think Cil will like this. Have to wait 'til December to get it for her birthday.

A week later, Sam packed up the painting for storage after taking a digital photo for her portfolio. The

original and copy were placed in their proper spots. She didn't want to look at it anymore. The reminder wasn't needed. The angel's face faded from Sam's memory.

Chapter 3

~ Return ~

"It was very thoughtful, dear. I appreciate it." Cil brought the serving dishes into the kitchen. "But I wish you had enjoyed it more."

Sam leaned against the counter, waiting for the end of the three-minute dishwashing cycle. "You know me, obsessing as always. Making sure the food was adequate, the guests enjoyed themselves, had on just the right music. Ah! Thank God it's over."

The dishwasher signaled it was finished. She opened the door, ready to put in the last load.

"Let me do that. You sit."

Sam didn't put up much resistance. Cil was wearing a beautiful, blue business suit. Sam remembered the reaction of Cat's friends when Cil walked in: a unison gasp of amazement. Her short, black hair was spiked to stand straight up. Just the fact that she had been wearing lipstick and eye shadow was shocking. The two-inch heels were the final stunner.

"I hope *you* enjoyed it." Sam pulled a chair close. "I mean, I know it barely could even be considered in the same breath as one of your gallery galas."

Cil stared at her, her darting brown eyes squinting. "Don't make me out to be some high society princess. Your mother used to do that."

Sam smiled. "I know. Just trying to make you feel at home."

The last of the dishes were placed in the washer and Cil leaned against the counter. "So, what's been going on with you?"

"Nothing important. You know, keeping busy with work."

"No new developments in the personal department? What about that woman you were talking to tonight? The one in the red dress."

Sam sighed. "Barbara."

Barbara had been Sam's one attempt at female intimacy. They had been working on a piece of artwork for two months. Her mother's condition had worsened. There was no denying the attraction felt by both of them. Sam was in awe of Barbara's talent and envied her outgoing personality. The fact that Barbara had a serious, ongoing relationship with a foreign arts dealer gave Sam a comfortable distance factor. In terms of physical perfection, Barbara was tall and had a beautiful figure. Everything about her burst with energy. Her ebony hair and deep, black eyes gave her an air of mystery that intrigued Sam. Barbara made physical contact as the hours of working together increased; the occasional stroke of the hair, slightly brushing hands; looks that lasted too long. The time they shared gave Sam a chance to relax. Her guard was down enough to accept Barbara's invitation for a drink at her place.

What happened that night was horrendous. Sam was frigid. Considering how attracted she was to Barbara, her reaction was unexplainable. All of that vanished as soon as their lips touched. There wasn't revulsion. It didn't seem alien. It just wasn't anything. The fact that she wanted to experience some physical intimacy with a woman was what led her to go through with it. However, after it was over she felt even more lost. Thankfully, Barbara had never spoken about it since.

"Barbara's a good friend, that's it."

"Seems like all you have are good friends."

"I don't mind."

"You sure about that?"

Cil walked over to the table and sat across from her. Sam began getting that uncomfortable feeling. There were times when Cil stared into her as if she was examining a foreign being. Cil was doing a lot of that this evening.

"No, I'm not sure. But it's fine."

Cil grabbed her hand. "You know that I'm here for you?"

Sam stared. *She's making her move.* The thought was so absurd she began to giggle.

"I'm alright. If there was something wrong I'd tell you."

"You would?" Cil stroked her arm.

OK, just stay calm. Cecilia Brennan is Mom's best friend. Guess she had to wait for when the time was right.

"Yes, I would."

"I'm glad you trust me. You mean a lot to me. More than you know."

I'm getting the picture. Time began to stretch out. Sam watched Cil move toward her. *This is it.* Sam waited for Cil's brightly painted lips to touch hers. She felt a slight brush against her forehead, like her mother used to do.

"You've always been like a daughter to me."

Sam felt embarrassed and stupid "You have no idea how glad I am to hear that."

The bright blue colors thrown on the walls of her work studio had a calming effect. Every morning Sam felt as if she had entered a beautiful dream. Barbara sat on her side of the room working on her artwork. Sam stood behind her admiring her stroke.

Sam sighed deeply. "Why does it come so easy to you?"

"It would come easy to you to if you just let go. Good morning."

"Morning. As much as I'd like to believe that I don't think that's the problem."

"Great party over the weekend, by the way. Thanks for the invite."

"Welcome."

"That Cil's quite a character. She got me alone for 10 minutes to find out every detail about our working relationship."

Sam eyed Barbara closely. "I must have missed that. What details did she ask about?"

"She seems really interested in you." Barbara splashed a bit of cerulean in the left side of the canvas.

"And your personal life."

"Well, Cil's been like a second mother to me."

"It shows. She's attractive, too. Is she seeing anyone?"

Sam rummaged through her brush drawer and pulled the drape off of her assignment. "You know, it's funny, but I don't remember Cil ever dating. Whatever she does, she keeps it private."

"That's a shame. She's a very striking woman. Like you."

Sam smiled. "Thank you."

The monitor on Sam's desk blinked with an incoming message. She tapped the screen. The plump face of her boss filled the box.

"I need to see you today," Agnieszka said.

"Morning to you, too, Aggie."

Barbara snickered. Sam was the only one who dared the nickname.

"I'm sorry, dear. Good morning to you. We have some urgent business to discuss. Can you meet me at Freda's for lunch at, say, 1:00?"

"Sure, no problem. What's it concerning?"

"Some art acquisitions. I think you'd be perfect for this project. We can talk about it in detail later. I've got to run."

Sam watched the screen fade to black. "Since when did I get promoted to the art acquisitions department?"

Agnieszka and Sam sat in one of the brightly colored booths in Freda's. It was always a busy spot. Sam joked that Aggie had acquired a few more gray hairs. Aggie motioned her to sit. There was no way anyone could notice new gray hairs. Short, silver strands framed her face. Aggie's small brown eyes were outfitted by thick-rimmed silver glasses and deep wrinkles. Her bow shaped mouth moved a mile a minute in meetings, but at informal times was slower and more determined. Aggie had been a supervisor to Sam's mother for 20 years. Sam began calling her Ms. Harmon when the Verona Art Preservation Society hired her as an art refurbisher. The nickname 'Aggie' had been given by Sam at the age of three because 'Agnieszka' would not come out of her young mouth. She was a regular dinner guest at the Dumas' home. Having no family, they became her surrogate one. They had been there for her numerous back surgeries and recuperation periods; as she was for Sam's mother during the long painful illness. She commented on the heartbreak she felt of losing the one woman she had thought of as a daughter.

Sam speared some salad. "I don't understand why Cil recommended me for this project."

"She's worried about you, dear. Like the rest of us."

"But I'm not qualified to go out on this type of assignment for the Preservation."

"You are, you just don't want to go. Isn't that it?" Agnieszka looked at her. "It's good PR for Vinto. They supply the Verona Art Preservation with funds to acquire pieces from other countries. Cil thinks it would be good for you to get out of here for a while. It's a scouting trip, plain and simple. It's all in the donation documentation I'll send you later today. Cil has agreed to act as your liaison. And if you insist on more details you can find out more from Chiletia."

"Alright. Let's say I agree. How long are we talking here?"

"No more than a month."

Sam grimaced. "Where?"

"Mexico." Agnieszka placed the last bite of salmon in her mouth. "Something wrong?"

"I was thinking Europe or Asia."

"Would that make it more appealing?"

Sam laughed. "Not really."

"You're a strange girl."

"That's why you love me." Sam pushed her plate away from her. "What am I going to do in Mexico all that time?"

"Look at art, relax, get away from the reminders so close to you."

"I haven't been on a vacation in a while."

"The last time you took a vacation was before you started working for VAP. And that really can't be considered a vacation. Where did you go? Miami for a week?"

"Well, I'll definitely consider it. OK?"

"OK. I'm sure Cil will do her best to convince you."

Sam sighed. "I'm sure that's high on her list of priorities."

Chapter 4

~ Exhibition ~

"Wait here a second."

Cil left Sam in the lobby of the Verona division of the Vinto Art Gallery to pique her interest in the scouting trip. Cil returned accompanied by a tall steely-looking woman. She was as inanimate as a statue. Her eyes blinked once. Sam moved forward.

"This is Marietta Halloway, a curator for the Vinto Gallery." Cil's eyes moved between them.

"Hello, Marietta." Sam extended her hand.

"Please, call me Ri." Her hand was as cold as granite. "Cil tells me you've been chosen to go art hunting for VAPS. Art is our life as I'm sure it is yours."

"Yes. Well, I haven't accepted yet."

"From what Cil told me I'm sure you're a perfect candidate for the trip."

"I hope she realizes that." Cil smiled. "Do you want the tour?"

"Sure. Will you join us, Ri?"

"I have to finish some acquisition papers. But I'm sure I'll be seeing you soon. It was very nice meeting you."

Sam had never been to an art gallery like this before. There were beautiful males everywhere. Sculptures of men in various poses were centered in the aisle. Some were naked. Portraits hung on the walls. Many were replicas of Masaccio and Uccello. Michelangelo's David was the centerpiece of the room. This memorial was in honor of a misunderstood creature: man.

Sam blushed. "I don't see a lot of this. Bound to embarrass anyone not used to it."

Cil sat on a bench in the corner of the room. "You're used to lying about your feelings. When you were little I would actually get a pain in here." She put her hand on her chest. "It was so familiar, it hurt me. The pain of hiding yourself, masking your face. It has to be transparent though: a thin one so as not to be too noticeable. But enough to satisfy those who don't look very deep for the true woman underneath. It's like an addiction, isn't it? All those late nights accessing sites searching for anything male...any sign of the men that used to walk among us, not the ones that are castrated and mute. You ask yourself why those are the only ones allowed to be among us. And why so few? Searching for any glimpse of the way it used to be: pictures, movies, music. I must say your collection of 20th century films rival even mine. Not the greatest time of men in my opinion. If memory serves, James Dean is one of your favorites. Also Marlon Brando, Gregory Peck, Paul Newman. There's another one you have a taste for. I'm drawing a blank...what is his name?"

"Johnny Depp." Sam felt as if she was floating. "How do you..."

"That's my job, dear. That's why I'm here. As much as I love spending time with you this is a business trip. I've come to rid you of your curiosity...give you experiences."

Cil took out a small silver case. She popped it open, exposing a row of cylindrical objects lined up neatly. All of those films had given Sam a strange familiarity with the tobacco industry.

"Those are illegal."

"Yes. Good thing, too. They'll kill you." Cil placed one of the slim cigarettes in her mouth and

offered the case to Sam. "Haven't you wondered why every bad boy in those movies smoked? You must be curious as to what they smell like. The fascination people had with them. Why people would put something into their bodies that could only eat away at them until there was nothing left?"

Sam took one and raised it to her nose. The smell was musty and rich. An alien odor, but pleasant. She handed it back to Cil.

"Smart girl. I don't light mine. I just keep them around as a reminder. Besides, where I spend most of my time I get enough smoke blown in my face."

She snapped the case shut and placed it in her pocket, holding her one unlit cigarette between two manicured fingers. Sam turned looked at the art on the wall. *Nothing to be scared of. It's Cil. She was always a little out there. But how the hell would she know about all the stuff I collected? She turned back and saw her staring, a small smile on her lips. I've been collecting since I was 10, she could know from Mom. But the online stuff. I know enough to not get that traced back to me. Anonymous, but what did Mom always say? Connections, that's all you need, connections.*

"Why did you bring me here?" She didn't face her.

"Your mother was afraid; thought you wouldn't be able to handle it. She had enough of a battle hiding what she knew." Cil's crept closer. "She told me before she died that you would be able to make the decision that's best for you. She knew you were different. And she knew how much of a struggle it would be for you. After all, she knew me."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you feel when you look at these things?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. It's not repulsion, is it? Does it seem that foreign to look at a male and imagine that there could be a human being capable of feelings and not an animal? Ajit, for example?"

"Ajit's not like these men."

"He doesn't have the appendage that describes him as a male because society is disgusted by his differences. He's still a man. He's no less of a person."

"I know that. But he was made that way to make sure he wouldn't be a threat. I don't agree with it, but I understand the reasoning. Everything that has perverted society can be directly linked to a male with a voice and a penis."

Cil had a mild look of shock on her face. "You don't believe that."

"It's a fact."

"Our society's fact. If you believe that then why do you keep looking for information about males?"

"I..."

"It's your nature."

Sam looked at Cil who was staring at a statue. "How do you know what my nature is?"

"I've been where you are." She glanced over her shoulder. "I admire your strength. I never would have been able to conceal it as long as you have. I broke out when I was 14 and never looked back. It's time for you to see what your options are."

"If you're right about my nature I have no options. Unless you want me to turn into an unstable woman who collects statues and paintings of something that doesn't exist."

"How do you know it doesn't exist?" Cil shook her head. "You can't even comprehend what I'm offering you. It's just too impossible."

"Why are you talking in riddles? Can't you just say it?" She stopped as if she had been slapped in the face. "This trip has nothing to do with me getting away. It's some weird plan you have. Something I'd never agree to. You wouldn't be doing this if Mother was alive."

"Your mother protected you for a long time. But we talked about this before she got sick. She wanted you to be happy."

"I am happy."

Cil looked tired. "I can't spell it out for you. You'll understand in time. But you should know that you're the one who makes the ultimate decision. You are your own possibility."

"I'd like to go home now."

Cil nodded. "Fine."

Sam slammed the door of her home. Cil had dropped her off after a car ride so quiet that the only sound was that of her angry breathing. She focused on the familiar tapping of a picture frame against the hall wall.

It's your nature.

She shook her head, outraged at the way Cil simplified everything. She didn't understand herself; how could Cil claim to do that. She wished she could hear her mother's voice drift out from the living room. Her knack for always being within earshot when Sam slammed the door had been uncanny. There would be the inquisitive, 'How many times have I told you not to slam that door?' Today there would be no sound from the other room. Sam dragged herself into the living room. She slumped on the couch feeling numb. The mauve upholstered chair that had been her mother's 'relaxation therapy' stared back at her from the corner of the room. A pillow found its way onto Sam's lap. She hugged it and let her mind slip back to more comforting times.

"What happened today?" Her mom put down her papers, but didn't take off her glasses.

"Nothing."

"Nothing doesn't make you come home from school like that." Her mom motioned to the pillow Sam was squeezing. "So, whose head is that suppose to be?"

Sam gnawed on the end of one corner. "Ms. Carter."

"Don't do that."

"It's my pillow."

"Still, if it looks like a dishrag I don't want it in the living room." She waited for Sam to comply. "Isn't she your History teacher?"

"I called her an ignorant bitch. I got sent to the principal for the day and detention for a week. If I hadn't apologized in front of the whole class I would have been suspended."

"That's not like you. What brought all that on?"

"She was lying." Sam threw the pillow on the floor. "About what happened to them."

"Who?"

"Men. She was going on and on about the uprising of women in the 21st century and the civil war and all this crazy shit. All the girls were taking it as fact. It pissed me off."

"Sam, she's your teacher."

"You're the one who showed me those old articles and the news footage. How can they be allowed to create a different past...make it all up?"

"I showed you those things so you would understand Ajit's position. Not for you to confront a teacher or enlighten the entire 9th grade."

"Everybody has a right to know the truth."

"Not everyone *wants* to know it was a disease that eradicated most of the male population and female heterosexuals. They don't care that the way it was transmitted made it less likely for lesbians to contract it. It makes for better drama to say that women took the initiative to conquer men. Who wants to hear that it took over 100 years after the discovery of AIDS for the percentage to be in women's favor and force them to take over?"

Sam shook her head. "It's all bullshit."

"I don't want to hear that language again. I know you're angry, but there's no reason for you to speak like." A sigh escaped her mother's lips. "I'm glad you care about Ajit, it shows how good a soul you have; but you could have done it a different way. Let me see the detention."

Sam stood up and fished the note out of her pocket. "I'm sorry."

"Go upstairs and cool off."

Sam nodded. "You're going to call Cil, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Because you always do when you're thinking of punishing me."

"Cil would want to congratulate you, so I don't think I'll let her in on this." Her mother laughed. "Get upstairs, you radical."

Ten years later Sam leaned against the same doorway hearing the echo of her mother's laugh. She stared at the empty chair wondering if her mother would be contemplating a punishment for Cil if she were here.

The last week of their visit, Cil spent most of her time on business. Meals spent together were short and silent. Cat noticed the friction when she came over for dinner. She was the catalyst in the conversation that night, a go-between. When Cil went upstairs Cat began the inquisition.

"What's going on?"

Sam wiped the kitchen table. "She's acting weird. I don't know what it is."

"Weird, how? Has she been coming on to you?"

Sam thought about the night when she had come to the same wrong conclusion. "No. You know Cil. She's just odd."

"I know. But you've always liked that about her."

Sam finished cleaning up and Cat went home.

"Come in, Sam."

Cil was in bed, reading. The sound of opera filled the room, a sound as familiar as the setting. Sam leaned behind the door, peering in.

"It's alright." Cil put the book down. "I'm never going to finish this thing."

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry for the way I've acted. It's just that, it's been hard adjusting to everything. Hitting me with all these ideas the way you did made me angry. The assumption that you know how I feel." She picked up a perfume bottle and passed it back and forth between her hands.
"Mother didn't even know how I felt. If she did, why didn't she talk to me about it? Why didn't you? I wish I didn't have to feel like I was all alone."

"You're not."

"Yes, I am. Like you are."

Cil patted the bed next to her. Sam sat down and Cil stroked her back smoothing out her curls.

"I'm alone because I chose it. You have every right to make the choice for yourself."

"I have so many questions."

"Of course you do. But I can't answer them right now. It's not safe."

Sam looked concerned. "What do you mean?"

"When most of your questions are answered, you'll understand."

As the music filled up the empty space, Sam asked, "Is Jit OK?"

"I heard from him a few weeks ago. He's still working at the furniture shop. He has a better chance there."

"He was like a brother to me. At least what I thought a brother would be like."

"He's a good person. You'd be surprised at how many good ones are out there."

Sam asked, "Men like Ajit?"

"I guess, according to your definition, not like Ajit. They're real men."

The transport waited outside. Cil checked inventory, making sure she had everything. Sam ran down the steps.

"Here's your notebook."

"Oh, thank you."

"Got everything?"

"Yep." They hugged. "I'll call you Sunday. I want you to do something for me, Sammy." She pulled a small disc from her bag. "Something I put together for you."

Sam took it. "What is it?"

"Something that might answer your questions. And hopefully, change your mind about the trip."

She frowned. "Don't think I'll be ready soon, the way I've been acting, stuck in some kind of stupid emotional fog."

"Wait 'til the cloud lifts...you'll be ready."

Sam watched her go down the front walk. Cil waved and Sam waved back. The transport drove away and Sam closed the door, the disc clutched in her fingers.

Chapter 5

~ Revelation ~

"Don't you ever get the feeling that a piece of you is missing?" Sam was feeling philosophical.

"Not when you're around."

Cat ran her fingers through Sam's hair. Sam grabbed her by the wrist. Cat moved off the couch.

"I know. Can't blame me for trying."

Sam followed her into the kitchen. These instances were occurring more frequently. Every time Cat had difficulty in a relationship, gestures like these were more prevalent. Cat wanted something from her she was not willing to give. They had been friends since the age of six. At 11 Cat developed a crush on her, but it was never overt: a sweet poem, little gifts, an occasional peck on the cheek. Being up front about her feelings seemed to be the best way for Sam to draw a boundary between them. Cat was having a hard time remembering that lately.

The glasses clinked together as Sam held them in one hand, the soymilk in the other. She watched as her friend meticulously chopped the vegetables making up the stir-fry.

Why can't I be like everyone else? A beautiful person loves me and I keep pushing her away. What else am I going to find better than this?

The knife slicing through the carrots broke the silence. Sam stared for a long time. Then, Cat vanished in a fog. When she was gone, Sam had a clear view of the living room: the couch, the table, the small disc case. The one Cil gave her before she left Verona. It jarred her memory.

Wait 'til the cloud lifts...you'll be ready.

She sat on the bed, turning the small disc case in her hands. She'd made a complete fool of herself over at Cat's. It was to be Cat's going-away dinner before the theater group left for the tour. They got through the meal without looking at each other. Sam said good-bye and left early. She debated with herself for days. She wanted to find out what Cil had left her. Her rational side told her the contents would just cause more confusion. Did she really need any more of that? The notebook on the table next to her bed chimed. It was 2:00 in the morning.

"The hell with it," she mumbled.

Sam threw the case in the trash and headed into the bathroom. She grabbed her robe from the door and slipped it on over her naked body. Her hair was secured in a ponytail so it would not get in her way as she tossed during the night. She took care of her face: the cleanser, lotion, teeth. Spitting out the rinse water, she looked up at herself. The house was so silent. It was funny how she'd never noticed that when her mom was around. Just knowing someone was there, down the hall, had filled the empty air around her. The familiar ring of an incoming call broke the silence. Sam headed into the bedroom and sat in front of her notebook. The message ID was from Cil. She opened the conference window.

"Hi, sweetie. Oh, God, I forgot the time over there. Did I wake you?"

"No. I haven't gotten to sleep yet."

"I've been waiting to hear from you. I thought you might have taken a look at the information. Sam, are you OK?"

"I don't think I'm going to be able to do that. I'm sorry."

"Well, if you're not ready. We can discuss it when you come to Morrah. Or whenever."

"Cil, I'm pretty beat. I really should get to bed."

Cil nodded. "Remember, you need me for anything..."

"I'll let you know." Sam smiled. "Night."

Sam disconnected from the VC. She fell back on the bed breathing deeply. As much as she wanted to she wouldn't get any sleep. She walked over to her music system. Scanning the discs she put in one of her favorites. A band from Ireland was popular during the last two decades of the 20th century. Cat had given it to her on her 16th birthday. A priceless piece to add to her collection. The singer's voice caressed one minute and caused the listener to cringe the next. It made her ache. The mix of studio and concert tracks enveloped her in the music. The sound from the headphones welcomed her into the stadium: the screams, the cheers. She felt herself there. However, she wasn't interested in concert travel. She wanted to sleep. Hitting the play button quiet strumming of a guitar filled the room. Then the voice emerged. She fell back on the bed. Closing her eyes, she drifted away. The sleep lasted for a few minutes. Screams of the singer awakened her, pleading and begging. One line repeated over and over. 'All I want is you!'

Such a simple thing to ask for. Another person. How could any woman say no to that? The song faded. Sam was in silence again. Thoughts came quickly. What would it hurt to look? Stupid fantasies. God, what if it's true? A place where men and women are together. Real men. She jumped off the bed and peered into the trashcan. It was waiting for her atop some tissues. Sam took a deep breath and opened the case. The CD was a promotional demo of the Vinto Gallery. The tour of the virtual museum was hosted by a woman of 50 by the name of Linda DeVecchio. She extolled the accomplishments of the gallery, its priceless treasures. Each room contained different types of art from various eras. It was impressive, but nothing Sam hadn't seen before. Then Ms. DeVecchio talked about how customers could purchase items. She talked of on-line acquisitions and auctions held across the country.

This might actually be doing the trick. I might have found a cure for my insomnia.

After the exhaustive lecture, Linda invited the viewer to feel free and tour the museum on her own. Sam spotted two paintings she had restored. A close-up of the painting was on the left side of the screen with dates and facts on the painter to the right.

Cil, I think Cat was right about you. You're losing it. If you ever had it to begin with.

Sam made her way to where the tour had started 45 minutes ago. She clicked on the register where she had signed in earlier. On the opposite page were names scribbled above her own. She hadn't bothered looking before.

Cute. Picasso, Botticelli, Donatello, Reubens.

As her cursor passed over the names, a hand appeared and took Sam to another screen. This contained a picture of the artists along with thumbnail sketches of their work. There was also a trivia quiz. These were challenging even for an art historian. She managed to get all 10 questions concerning Picasso. Her reward: a quick return to the index. She was about to take the disc out when she noticed the cursor had landed on her name. She guessed there was a program glitch or something. *Like there would be information on me.* She clicked. There, in the left-hand corner was a picture of her smiling back at herself. It had been taken at Cil's birthday party two years ago. Looking at the sketches, she recognized drawings she had given to Cil. A short bio was placed on the right side. Blinking under it was the sentence, 'Are you ready to be challenged?' She entered the trivia quiz.

What is Sam's favorite color? That's easy. *Blue.* The screen flashed: CORRECT

What is Sam's average weight? What did Cil always tell her to say? *None of your damn business!*
CORRECT

What is the number of Sam's Deposit Box at Verona Capital Bank? Sam opened up the drawer of the table and looked for the key. The box was emptied after her mother passed away, so she didn't think twice about entering the number: 9754632. CORRECT

Name five movies owned by Sam Dumas: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, A Streetcar Named Desire, Sweetie Swanson, Don Juan DeMarco, The Long Hot Summer.* INCORRECT

She smiled. She thought the program had been written to say correct to everything. She deleted *Sweetie Swanson* and put in *Rebel Without a Cause*. CORRECT

They kept coming. She was surprised at how much she had to think to answer most of the questions.

What is Sam Dumas' sexual orientation? The cursor blinked. This had never been asked before. Not by anyone, not even her mother. Sam typed: *heterosexual*. CORRECT

The screen went blank. Slowly, the face of Cil filled the screen.

"Glad you got this far. First thing, as soon as you get done, destroy this. This is vital. You should know that you have been connected to the Vinto Art Gallery server. It will download and remove all questionable parts of the CD as it is viewed. No trace. This is for your safety as well as the safety of our business. We do this with all prospective clients."

Prospective clients?

"The Vinto Gallery holds auctions. We feel that there is a particular type of merchandise that you have been unable to locate. When you finish viewing the samples we ask that interested clients contact her dealer. Arrangements can be made to make sure you have the opportunity to purchase whatever catches your eye."

Sam watched in awe as pictures of males flashed on the screen. Money amounts flashed on the screen, none less than \$10,000. Her eyes popped open. She saw men and women in sexual positions. They flashed on long enough to register in Sam's mind. These were not paintings. These were photographs. Illegal. This was the real thing. The images began to move. The back of a woman's head moved up and down, her hair held by the male whose groin was hidden. A woman leaned forward on a bed, moving rapidly back and forth. A male moved in the same motion. Still another man was tied up naked on a bed begging for forgiveness. Another man and woman writhed together under silk sheets. The familiar voice of her gallery host, Linda DeVecchio floated into Sam's ear.

"We can make your dreams a reality. If you are interested in more intimate services, our auctions are your chance for a safe and pleasurable encounter."

Cil's voice emerged from the blackness. "Sam, this is what I do. I offer women a chance to experience things they only dream about. Your mom told me you were ready to make this decision. Neither of us doubted you had these thoughts. She wanted you to realize you're not alone. You aren't any more abnormal than anyone else. And I wanted you to know the truth and understand what I do. I want you to see this for yourself. If you're ready, let me know."

The screen went black. She was dazed. Sam walked down the stairs to the garbage disposal and threw the CD in. She turned it on and made sure that there was nothing left but ashes. When she went back to bed she immediately fell asleep.

Chapter 6

~ Rendezvous ~

Sam sat in the same seat for three hours. Her restlessness was driving her adjoining neighbor crazy. The 40ish woman looked over at her every few minutes. Sam's apologies were of no use.

She had called Cil at 7:00 AM after she viewed the disc. Her interest was real enough to taste. The admittance of the existence of a place was the turning point. Cil told Sam every thing would be arranged and Agnieszka would fill her in on the details. A reminder about the secrecy of the situation was made before the conversation ended. To the outside world it was another acquisition trip. Sam enjoyed the covertness of these actions. It was very like the trips she and mother made to visit Ajit. Though those had only been across town they held the same danger as this long journey did. Sam's curiosity had been piqued and there was no turning back.

And now they were over the Gulf of Mexico. She glanced out the window every five minutes. Seeing the gray water under the white clouds made her sick to her stomach. The water eventually turned to land and 20 minutes later they had reached the southernmost tip of Mexico. She was surprised at the bleakness of the landscape. Mostly dirt and dull sky surrounded the small airport. The antiquity of the place was obvious. Sam stepped off the portable staircase and onto the runway. She searched for a sign of Cil. The airport lobby was filled with passengers discussing the frustration of the late tour bus. The arrival door swung open and a hush flowed over the crowd. Sam's jaw dropped and her shoulder bag fell to the ground with a thud.

A man in his late 20s, wearing dark sunglasses and a black suit, stood in front of the doors. His hands were cupped over each other and his arms tucked stiffly against his chest. The scene would have been comical if it hadn't been so weird. The wind caused a cloud of dirt behind the stoic figure. It gave him an ethereal quality as if he was a figment of the imagination. He scanned the room with deliberateness. Like the second hand on a clock, his head moved mechanically. It stopped and Sam began to sweat. He was looking right at her underneath those glasses.

The crowd parted. Unable to move she stared as the man walked toward her, hands and arms in the same position. The features on his face were like chiseled stone. He stopped, unclenched his hands, reached into a side pocket, and pulled out a small card. A woman in the crowd screamed and it echoed in Sam's ears. Another woman yelled for an officer. Sam grabbed the card and read 'Welcome to Morrah' scribbled in Cil's distinctive handwriting. She looked at the stranger who pointed politely to the arrival door. He assessed the area around him on constant alert. Sam led the way and the man picked up her forgotten bag. The woman was still screaming and another was trying to find anyone who could take care of the male. The male opened the door to the large transport for her. Sam took a deep breath and entered. *This is the beginning...*

Sam stared at the male seated opposite. There was a numb feeling in her head. She couldn't quite believe that she was in such close proximity to an unknown op. Cold air assaulted her from all angles. Her body shivered.

"Sorry, not quite state o' the art down here."

The voice was smooth. The glasses came down and revealed a pair of green eyes. As he moved toward her, hand outstretched, she recoiled. Confusion crossed his face as Sam watched him close the vent that was emitting the arctic temperature.

"Don't worry, Sam, I can't hurt you. Against policy and all. Cil wouldn't be pleased."

Sam settled back into her seat as she stole glances at him. He looked out the tinted window, then at his

watch, then out the rear window. Occasionally, he looked at Sam with no more reaction than he gave any other object. His hair was cut close to his head. His rigid posture was evident. His eyes were the only active things about him. A beautiful green color. Sam couldn't remember seeing anyone with eyes that color. He had a symmetrical face. He was beautiful, like a dream.

"My name's Sid, by the way."

The hand stretched toward her. She grasped it. The pressure of his hand against hers was strong. It only lasted a second. *Any longer and I might need a doctor.*

"Nice to meet you."

"Hope so. Accordin' to Cil, I'm goin' to be around for most of your stay in Morrah. Make sure you enjoy yourself."

He said it with the same steady tone and smiled politely. The world outside was spacious and unpopulated. Sam wondered where all the people were. Dirt and dust coated her clothing and the occasional buildings that book-ended the sides of the road.

"As you can tell, we don't have much of a traffic problem. Least not in the daytime. Gonna change tomorrow night though. Openin' Night."

"Opening Night?"

"Cil'll fill you in."

Sam was getting nervous. *What the hell am I doing here? He could be taking me anywhere.*

A ringing filled the small interior of the transport. Sid opened a small compartment and pulled out a rectangular object attached to a twisted cord. He put it to his ear and began speaking.

"Yes, alright, no problem. Yes, she is. I'll take care of it." He offered the phone to Sam. "It's Cil."

She inspected the device. "Only seen these in the movies. Hello?"

"Samantha, it's so good to hear your voice. I'm sorry I couldn't warn you about your escort, but we do need to keep things under wraps."

"It was a pleasant surprise." She smiled at Sid.

"Listen, I'm not at the gallery. Official business drove me out of Morrah. But Sid has his orders. He'll get you settled in. Don't worry about a thing. Have I put you in an uncomfortable position? With Sid?"

"Well...a little."

"He's my assistant. My most loyal subject. Never does anything without permission. I probably won't get in 'til very late."

"I'll wait for you."

"Wonderful. I'm glad you're here. I'll see you later."

"Bye, Cil."

The connection was gone. A flat buzz filled her ear. She handed the phone back to Sid.

"We're almost there."

There wasn't much to see once they reached the densely populated town. The busy atmosphere was more in tune to an afternoon in Verona. At first it was eerily familiar until the difference slapped her in the face. *Men.* There were men of all shapes, colors, and sizes. A man on the corner selling

periodicals nonchalantly held a conversation with a woman. A group of men were on another corner. They were not much older than she was. They were joking around. And an older male sat on the steps of a building gazing at the action on the streets. Antique cars and trucks lined the road. It was unbelievable. Sam felt fear creep into her.

Sid looked at her. "It's alright. You're safe."

Chapter 7

~ Gallery ~

Sid opened the doors to the huge building that was the centerpiece of the city of Morrah. It stuck out because of its design and newly furbished appearance. Sam counted four levels. It dwarfed all of its neighbors. The air was thick. She looked around. There were males 20 feet away on the sidewalk. She was too scared to make eye contact with them. Sid motioned for her to enter through the glass double doors.

A young woman with long blond hair and a business suit was behind a desk in the gallery's greeting room. She introduced herself as Lauren. Sam followed Sid into the elaborate lobby of the museum. The beauty gave an immediate sense of calm. The art was well known and it was obvious that Cil had found most of it. Her taste and style were everywhere.

"Cil designed the buildin' herself," Sid said.

"Beautiful."

"Here, let me show you where you're stayin'. You'll have time to look around later."

"Oh, my bag. I must have left it at the airport."

Sid raised a hand. "It's in the trunk. I'll have the driver bring it in for you. Don't worry, everythin's taken care of." This op had been brought up in the southern part of America by his distinctive accent.

"This way."

They took a short trip up two flights in a tiny elevator to the right of the lobby. Their proximity to each other was closer than in the car. She was finding it difficult to keep her eyes off of the being next to her, but he stared straight ahead. He looked bored. But his eyes *were* beautiful; even from a profile view with a small green crescent gazing up. A bell alerted them to the destination. Sid walked out holding the door open for her. She waited in a hallway with doors on each side. Sam counted five.

"This is where we store the artwork we don't have room to display. Cil just keeps buyin'. They'll be shipped to other Vinto galleries soon." He opened a door and Sam peered in at immaculately kept rooms with statues and paintings in protective casings on walls, stands, and easels. "Only special visitors are let into the top two levels. On the top floor is what we call the prop room. Wardrobes and costumes from a variety of fashion periods. If you don't have a thing to wear openin' night chances are you'll find it upstairs." He grinned down at her as the door closed. "For that you can see either me, Cil, or Ri."

The name raced through Sam's mind and clicked. The gallery in Verona. It made sense that she would be in on it. Sam followed him down to the last door on the left.

"We fixed this up for you." Sid opened the door to a small bedroom sparsely decorated. "There's a bathroom through there."

He nodded and Sam made a quick survey of the bedroom. It wasn't much, but she wouldn't be spending much time in here. She stared up at Sid.

"Where do the other visitors stay?"

"Cil doesn't concern herself with accommodations. She gives suggestions and it's up to them to take it from there. Cil can't make herself too involved in their business. She's here to offer them one thing. I'll go and get the driver to bring your bag in. You have a few hours to rest before Cil gets back."

"Thank you, Sid."

"My pleasure."

He gave her that faint hint of a smile before leaving her in the small room with no windows. She turned and found her eyes staring back in the full-length mirror on the opposite wall. She was startled to see how scared she looked. Reality soaked into her. *I've been alone with a male for the past two hours. A gorgeous male at that.* It should have been more a more historic encounter. It only solidified Cil's theory of their normalcy. *He is lovely too look at, though.*

An hour passed and Sam put her few things in the dresser, lay down on the twin bed, and listened to the muffled noises of the street outside: cars, voices, music. It was impossible to calm down. If anything, she felt trapped in this tiny room. Sid had given her a key for her door if she felt she needed to lock up. Grabbing it off the dresser, she made her way down the hall to the elevator. A minute later she was on the first floor in the gallery staring at the artwork. This form of meditation worked better. It connected her to Cil and her other life. She felt she could breathe down here. Hard footsteps made their way across the marble floor.

"I wouldn't spend too much time alone, either." Cil greeted her with a warm smile.

Sam walked over to hug her. "I thought you'd never get here."

"Business, dear. Business always ties me up, you know that. You look very pale." She took Sam's clenched fists. "Your hands are freezing."

"Just nervous."

"Already? You'll be a basket case by tomorrow."

"What's this opening night anyway? It's too much for me all at once."

Cil nodded. "We can call it off. I can have you on the first flight back to Verona."

"Excuse me, Cil." Sid's voice echoed sharply. "There's a phone call for you. Vinto VIPs."

"Tell them I'm done for the evening. They can call back in the morning. Will you order some dinner from down the street? The usual. And I'd like you to join us tonight."

"Certainly."

Sam quietly eyed Sid.

"Does he make you nervous?"

"Yes."

"Good. All your senses haven't been completely deadened by propaganda." Cil grabbed her cold hand and led her out of the room. "It means you're alive inside. How would you describe the nervousness? Are you afraid he's going to hurt you?"

"I was at first."

"Then what?"

"He's like what I've seen in the movies."

They made their way into Cil's office in the back. A small dinner table was situated against a window that looked out onto the street. It was the center of Morrah. And there was a lot of activity in the growing darkness. Noises could be heard clearer from this spot.

"He is very handsome," Cil said. "They all are in their own way."

"They?" Sam sat in a chair and rubbed her hands together to warm them.

"The males that work for me. Tomorrow is the grand opening of the gallery. Visitors from all over the world are making their way to this small part of Mexico to see what we have to offer. To purchase, if they so choose."

"That's it?"

"Tomorrow there will be ops here to make their stay more enjoyable. A party that I'd like you to attend, if you want to. You'll have a chance every night 'til next Friday."

"What do you mean?"

"Our grand openings last a week. You'll have more than one opportunity to meet as many males as you like."

Sam smiled. "Where do you keep them? In a cage?"

"Don't be ridiculous. They have as much freedom as any other op. They come from all over. It's how they make their living."

"By entertaining a bunch of women who wonder what it's like to be around a male?"

"Exactly."

"And you do this because..."

"Because I can. And it's very profitable. You'd be surprised how much a desperate woman will pay to have dinner with a male that can hold a conversation."

"That's the only reason?"

"The other reasons will come in time."

Sam remembered the images on the disc Cil had given her. She wondered why she wasn't telling the whole story. It was obvious why these males were getting paid. It wasn't for their ability to hold a conversation. She looked out onto the street. Artificial lights illuminated buildings. *So like Verona.*

"How'd you find this place?"

"One of my scouting expeditions. We find places out of the realm of modern laws; anarchy in a way. My places have to be familiar, too. This small version of a metropolis was perfect. Reminds me of Verona."

"That's exactly what I was thinking." She wondered if Cil would ever tell her who 'we' were?

"When I told your mother about it..." Cil looked down, picking at her jacket. "Well, we thought it would be the perfect place for you to finally see what I was all about."

"How long ago was that?"

"Two years. You see, none of this is rash. A tremendous amount of planning has been done. Sarah thought that this would help you find yourself."

Sam heard a noise outside the office entrance. Sid peeked in.

"Dinner should be here in 15 minutes. Would you like some wine?"

"Yes, some Merlot, please."

Sam watched Cil gaze at the space he had just filled. "Tell me about Sid."

"Not much to tell. He's been with me since he was 12. Before that I don't know. I've never gotten the

whole story out of him. I found him in Vegas where one of our other galleries is located. He was working on the streets."

"At 12?"

Cil nodded. "That's not unusual. He wasn't getting anywhere, though. He was taken advantage of too often. Vegas is a great place for that. A few males who worked for me told me about his situation. They knew the dangers of that life and asked me if I could get him out. I wouldn't hire him for encounters. Others would have, but he was too young. I was willing to give him a place to stay, but he wouldn't take my charity. Then, when I offered him a way out after his accident..."

"Accident?"

Sid walked in with a bottle of wine wrapped in a burgundy cloth. Sam eyed him for an instant, not noticing any infirmity. Silently he poured the wine in two glasses.

"You didn't set a place for yourself." Cil made her way to an ornate oak cabinet next to her desk.

"I wasn't expecting to join you tonight." He placed the bottle on the table as a soft chime echoed into the room. "That must be dinner."

Cil brought back a plate, glass, and silverware, arranging them on the table.

"Did mother ever meet him?"

"Oh, no, this job requires me to remain hush-hush about many things. At least where my males are concerned."

"You said something about an accident?"

"One of his jobs turned ugly. A woman castrated him, then tried to kill him by slitting his throat. It was a miracle he was found before he bled to death. He was taken to an underground clinic, treated, and released into my custody. That was a few months before your mother found Ajit. I offered him a job running errands and keeping me organized. There was nothing else for him to do; that's the sad thing. He tried to kill himself. Severe depression. I can't imagine what he went through. What he still goes through at times. At least his voice was spared."

Cil cleared her throat as Sid wheeled a serving cart into the room.

"Here we are."

"Bring it right over here and sit yourself down."

Sid obeyed orders. Cil did the talking. Halfway through the meal Sam looked at the window and found Sid staring at her reflection. His slight grin appeared for a second. She looked down. The phone rang and Sid stood up to answer it. Cil pushed him back down in his chair and left to take the call.

"How do you like it so far?" Sid amused himself with the contents of his plate.

"It's nice, I guess."

"Cil fill you in about openin' night? It can be overwhelmin' for a first timer."

"I get that feeling."

"Do you know what you're lookin' for?" He looked up from his plate. "The kind of man you'd like to have an encounter with?"

Sam stared at him. He seemed so hard. Even his eyes were a darker shade of green.

"I haven't even thought about that."

"I find that hard to believe." He looked back to his plate. "Why else would you come?"

"I didn't know what I was in for. I had an idea, but that was all."

"That's all any woman comes here with. An idea is all you need. You seem smart. Once you put two and two together, you know what Cil does."

"How would you describe it?"

Sid let out a small laugh. "She's the mother of all pimps."

"Thank you, Sid."

Cil's voice sounded sharp as she walked back to the table. Sam thought Sid would cower, but he continued eating.

"Sorry, Cil, you know I love you."

Cil sipped her wine. "I was trying not to be quite so blunt with Samantha."

"I know."

"How is it you can be quiet for days and then open your mouth and have that spill out?"

Sid shrugged. It was odd the way they interacted with each other. It was so...*normal*. Like a mother and son at dinner, like Sam had seen in countless movies.

"Sam? You look a little lost."

"I'm fine." She cleaned her mouth with her napkin.

"Sid told you what you already guessed, I'm sure."

Sid was staring back at the window. *I wonder if this is some type of initiation. Push some buttons to see if I'm ready.*

"Yes."

"Do you think you would be interested in that?"

"Yes." She stared back at Sid's reflection and was pleased to see a shocked expression on his face. "I don't think I'll be ready tomorrow. But I don't want to rule out the possibility. After all, that's what I'm here for, isn't it?"

"It's all up to you, whatever you think is right for you."

Sam nodded and finished her meal.

Chapter 8

~ Imitation ~

Sam sat on the bed, staring into the full-length mirror. It was another person. An alien being.

I feel like...what were they called...male transvestites. That's what I look like, a female impersonator. A drag queen.

Cil spent the afternoon preparing her for the event. Sam took a long bubble bath and was schooled in the art of shaving. Her legs and armpits were hairless a half-hour later. She liked the smooth feel of the lotion on her skin, but wouldn't be doing it on a regular basis. She decided not to go with a platinum wig. Cil helped Sam curl her hair into ringlets, which she positioned artistically on top of her head a few cascading down her back and on the sides of her face.

"Helen of Troy." Cil laughed as she gazed into the mirror behind Sam.

Sam giggled. "I'm ridiculous."

"Nonsense, you will not begin to reach the level of ridicule appropriate for the costume until you put this on." She pulled out a small crown.

"No way."

"I told you, this is anything-goes...and this goes." Cil placed the tiara covered with blue gemstones on top of Sam's head, securing it under a few curls. "Stunning. A little makeup and you're ready to go."

She rifled around in some drawers as Sam critiqued the creation. The clothes were Cil's: neon blue leather pants and a white lace shirt that revealed too much. Cil explained she would be wearing a bra underneath.

Sam was intrigued about that undergarment. It was the oddest feeling. Her breasts were pushed up and squeezed together. They were in a position totally opposing the pull of gravity. She had seen many types in films. Some made a woman's breasts look like pyramids under sweaters. Others made a woman look as if she were about to explode out of her apparel. Some lifted and separated, others crossed women's hearts. But one question always emerged: *why?* Whatever the reason, men liked them. At least, what they did to a woman's upper region. More was better than less. Hopefully hers would be sufficient. She felt competition toward the other women she would see tonight. *Will my breasts measure up?* She flashed an evil grin in the mirror as she looked at her profile. Cil had called them impressive.

The shoes were another story altogether: stilettos. They were the same color as her pants, which looked as if they were plastered to her body and shined by a hot wax treatment. It had taken a half-hour of walking to get used to the noise that emitted from her vinyl attire. She hoped she wouldn't fall on her ass as she walked. Cil kept reminding her to not look down.

"You look beautiful."

"I feel like a hooker."

"Honey, if you don't like it, change. I'm trying to help, but you're not giving me any clues." She glanced at her watch. "I've got to get going. Here's some lipstick, eye shadow, few other things if you're interested." She placed a bottle in her hand. "I thought you might like this."

The bottle was small and round, made of black volcanic glass. The cap was the shape of a flower. Sam smelled the gentle, lingering scent of lilac.

"Your mom loved this. I noticed you forgot to bring it with you so I bought you some."

"But this is nothing like mine...this is wonderful."

"It's from France. Pure lilac extract. Connections." She walked to the bedroom door. "You've got an hour. Just ring Sid when you're ready and he'll escort you downstairs."

Sam nodded. "Thanks, Cil."

"Enjoy yourself and don't forget to breathe."

Chapter 9

~ Transformation ~

Who do you want to be tonight? Sam rummaged through racks of clothes in the prop room. She had tossed off the other ensemble and put on her own attire. Ri was watching her closely. She turned the tall woman with the black, angular cut wig. Louise Brooks had nothing on this woman. The white powder, maroon lipstick, tightly tailored black suit: she perfectly represented what this night meant to Sam. A cloaked mystery. Ri stared back the entire time. A slight, crooked smile emerged from the left side of her meticulously sketched lips.

"Find anything? There's another rack toward the back wall."

Sam passed a few columns with nude males etched into them. If worse came to worse she would wear what she had on. Nothing wrong with it. Nothing special about it either. She stopped as her hand rested on a soft white silk. She pulled the dress off the rack. This is it. It had been transported out of the 1950s. It wrapped softly around Sam's body and hugged it. There were no sleeves, just a strap that tied around the neck, exposing her shoulders. Sam's breasts would be completely covered, which was a relief. This will work. She walked confidently past Ri back to the bedroom on the lower floor.

A half-hour later the outfit was complete. She loved the feeling of the fabric against her skin. She found a pair of white heels that were not as dangerous as the stilettos. The skirt was tight against her thighs, but stretched with her. She practiced her walk. The cut of the dress dictated how she would walk. It wasn't completely unnatural, but different than her normal stroll. It made her stand up straighter; her shoulders move in sync with her hips. Magic. I am transformed.

The only adjustment made to her hair was the removal of the tiara. The only makeup she applied was a red lipstick. She kept on the same undergarments and decided against hosiery feeling a slip was enough. Marilyn and Liz didn't wear pantyhose that much. That's what she felt like, a hybrid of the two biggest female sex symbols of the 20th century. The Cat scratches a Seven Year Itch on a Hot Tin Roof. She laughed. What does this matter? The men are being paid to make sure every woman is adored. I could show up in a sack. I'm just doing it for myself.

She scrutinized herself one last time and headed over to the dresser. With a smile she grabbed and opened the black bottle. She applied a few drops of the perfume behind her ears; the back of her neck; under her arms; between her breasts; the back of her knees; and her ankles. She thought she remembered some beautiful woman doing that in a film. She closed her eyes and inhaled the lilac. Now, she was ready.

Chapter 10

~ Delights ~

She sat at the corner of the bar taking in the odd odor of the place. No matter how many times she had imagined it, nothing prepared her for this moment. After looking around at the tables and their inhabitants, she was awakened from her haze by a voice of the opposite sex.

"Can I get you anything?" asked the op at the other side of the bar.

He was a vision, a replica; as were the three others floating around the club. Sam was sure she had seen him in a film. His age was hard to pin down. He was timeless. He smiled at her, used to the reaction.

"Anything to drink?" He flashed teeth so white Sam was sure they had to be fake.

"Um...I guess I'll have some white wine."

Sam managed to muster those few words with relative ease. She realized the back wall was a huge aquarium. A neon blue light flooded in from the opposite side of the wall making the fish and plants look electric. There were angelfish, some black mollies, guppies, and a flounder with blue spots. It was beautiful. Sam's gaze came upon two eels swimming toward the back of the aquarium. They were moving in sync mirroring each other's movement. She jumped back. A reflection of herself stared back. The back wall was a mirror, allowing her to get a good glimpse of the goings on with the occasional fish distorting the view. The bartender placed a glass of wine in front of her.

"Cil wants to make sure you enjoy yourself. If you have any questions feel free to ask."

"I wouldn't even know where to start."

"I'm Tom, your resident best-friend bartender, a pre-requisite of any good nightclub. You can ask me anything...most do."

He polished the counter with a white cloth. Sam stared at his hand. It was very tan, making her wonder at what beach he sun-bathed upon without being arrested. His hand looked as if it would be soft to the touch. His fingers were short and thick. She noticed a few veins protruding up and receding down under the skin. He moved the cloth in a circular motion over the smooth wood surface. Tom's voice broke the spell.

"Your first time here, from what I've been told. How does it compare with what you were expecting?" Tom stuffed the cloth in his belt.

Sam glanced from side to side, trying to come up with words. "It's heaven. I still can't believe I'm here. I'm so glad Cil allowed me to come in early. I really don't think I would be able to walk in here when it's in full swing. I need to assimilate into these bizarre surroundings."

"Well, you certainly sound like a perfect candidate."

They talked for a half-hour. He was preparing for the night's events while she went through three glasses of wine. It was 1:00 AM.

"Are you participating in the auction?" he asked.

"Oh, God, no. Are you kidding? My first night in this place?"

Tom grinned. "Most women come here expressly for that purpose."

Smoke hung thick and ominous. It reminded her of a movie she from the 1960s. It made everything

look dated. The neon lights sliced through openings in the cigarette clouds. She was enjoying herself immensely. The club was now full. The ops were making their rounds; moving from table to table, booth to bar, making sure the customers were enjoying themselves. It was amazing how normal everyone was. Like the most natural thing in the world was to come to a club three stories underground and see women mingling with ops. Most of them looked at Sam, as if they had been made aware of her presence beforehand. They circled her like big game hunters waiting for the bravest one to make the first move. Sam listened to the live band. Males were decked out in swing suits from the 40s. Every time period seemed to blend perfectly in this microcosm.

Cil tapped Sam on the shoulder. "You look like you're about to drop."

"Do I? This is absolutely, I can't believe, how great this is." She tried to stand, but fell laughing.

"Hey, Tommy..." She dragged herself up by the barstool. "I want one of those drinks that one down there ordered, what was it? Oh, yeah...a blow job."

Cil gave him a reproachful look. "I told you to make sure she didn't have a lot to drink."

"Three glasses of wine shouldn't do that much damage." Tom resumed cleaning rings of condensation.

Cil gestured to Sid at the end of the bar. "Take her up to my office."

Sam locked her knees into position. "No, please. I'm fine. I need to sit down somewhere."

"Sam, you had your fun...too much from the looks of it. It would be a good idea if you headed back up to your room."

"You're sending me to my room?" Laughter again. "I haven't had anymore to drink than the other women around here. Right, Tommy?"

Tom smiled as he dried a glass with a clean cloth. "No, but I don't feel personally responsible for those women if they fall on their asses. This might be too much for you all at once."

"Can't I stay a bit longer? I promise to behave."

Sam flashed back to when she was five. Her mother was having a dinner party for some friends. Cil carried her to her bedroom. 'I'll be good, Cil...I just want to listen.' She came back to the present hearing her speak those very same words.

"You're tired, Sam." Cil paused. "And drunk."

Sid walked up. "I'll seat her at a booth in the corner. She can't get into a lot of trouble there. I'll watch her if you like."

"As soon as she dozes off, take her upstairs." She looked Sid in the eye. "To rest."

Tom gave her a wink. "You alright, Cil?"

"Yes, Tommy. Crazy night. Just got an unexpected visitor, that's all."

Sid brought her a third cup of coffee. Sam's eyes felt as if they were popping out of her head. She was afraid if she blinked she'd miss something. Sid turned out to be a wonderful source of information on the patrons and ops.

"Should you be telling me all this?"

"No. That one over there...by the column. Wherever a club is happenin', she's there."

Sid gestured to a dignified looking woman of about 40. Her hair was up in a huge, massive form. It was a beautiful silver color under the lights, but lens-colored glasses hid her eyes. She wore a suit that matched her hair.

"Does she participate in the auctions?"

"I suppose so...don't really know for sure...all that's confidential."

Sid's smirk did all the talking. *You know she does. Just go along with it.* Sam melted when she saw that smile. It was wickedly juvenile. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him...if he would smile like that while she kissed him. All of sudden Sam had an urge.

"Oh, all this coffee has gotten to me. I have to use the bathroom."

Sid got up. "I'll show you where it is."

"I can manage...just point the way."

Sid looked apprehensive. "You sure...you're not goin' to fall over on the way? Cil told me to watch after you."

"I'm fine. Besides I want to take in the atmosphere a bit."

"I'll be watchin' the whole time. See that hall down by the bar? It's the door on the left."

"OK."

Sam began the daunting task of walking 75 feet from the booth to the bathroom. Try as she might to look ahead, she was intrigued by an op's interest in a 30ish woman at a table near the stage. Sam watched him speak into the woman's ear. She closed her eyes and bit her lip. She was about to touch his cheek. Sam slammed into a chest wearing a silk shirt.

"Oh, I am sorry. Are you alright?"

The op grabbed both of Sam's arms as she leaned backward. The huge male was dark. Beautiful. European. She knew that instantly.

"I am sorry."

He had an accent Sam thought might be Spanish. His hair was slicked back and he smelled of strong cologne. It made her head spin even more.

"I'm fine...my fault." Sam had no idea where to put her hands to gain balance.

"I am Paolo. And you?" He shot her a devastating grin and looked her up and down.

"Not for you, Paolo." It was Sid. "That way."

He pointed to the bathroom. Sam continued walking. She heard Sid say something to the Spaniard about 'probation'. Turning the corner, Sam noticed a long line on the left. Her bladder couldn't wait another 10 minutes. She walked back and leaned over the bar. Tom poured a martini.

"Tom? Is there another bathroom? I've got a little emergency."

"Afraid not. Why don't you use Cil's in her office? Hold on, let me ring her."

Tom picked up an ancient-looking phone, pressing some buttons. After a few seconds he hung up.

"This way..." He swung the counter open and showed her to a hall in back of the aquarium. "Press the button and you're on your way. But don't spend a lot of time. Makes her nervous...and she's watching."

Sam nodded, having no idea what he meant. She realized that the back of the aquarium was a two-way mirror. *Pretty Clever, Cil.* She was inspecting the scene when she heard a voice.

"Sam, dear, I don't have all day. I have other things to take care of besides your bladder. Make your

way to the elevator."

Sam moved to the end of the hall and pressed the blue button. The door slid open. She stepped inside. It was done in an ornate blue and gold renaissance fashion. In a few seconds she traveled up to her destination. She found herself facing a huge office. Cil looked back at her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hold you up."

"It's okay. I'm spread a bit thin tonight."

Sam looked around. "This is even nicer than your office upstairs."

A huge blank monitor was in back of her. Beautiful pieces of art hung everywhere. There were scenes containing men as well as women. There was a small sculpture against the side wall. It was of a woman wearing a robe and hood on top of her head. She was leaning back on rocks on the side of a mountain. Above her was a beautiful angel with an arrow raised to pierce her breast. Cil noticed her reaction to the piece.

"It's called 'The Ecstasy of St. Teresa', a Bernini replica. The original was made during the 17th century."

Sam smiled. "The Ecstasy...what do you think happened next?"

"I think she was ravished by the angel."

"Angels don't ravish women."

Cil grinned. "Angels do whatever they want. What do *you* think happened?"

Sam looked at it for a minute. "I think the angel rescued her by piercing her with the arrow filled with God's love. Filling her with a love so great she died...in the ultimate ecstasy."

"I like my version better."

Sam remembered why she had bothered Cil in the first place. "Where's the bathroom?"

As Cil rose from her desk, Sam heard a sound from the right. "Follow me." Cil disappeared in the soft yellow glow coming out of the hallway. "When you're done you can let yourself back downstairs. Easier to get out than in."

She grinned with the Cil attitude Sam was so fond of. She showed her the door on the left and continued down to the end of the hall. Sam guessed it was a living room and caught a glimpse of a few more portraits through the opening as she made her way into the bathroom.

Chapter 11

~ Introduction ~

When Sam exited the bathroom she heard a bell. She turned the corner to see Cil facing the elevator. She made sure no one was watching from the other end of the hall. Hiding behind the hall corner, she waited to hear the elevator door open and shut. She peered back around to see an empty office. Opportunity awaited. She didn't want to be too nosey. All she wanted was to get a nice long look at the paintings. They were exquisite. She remembered the other paintings she had spotted in the room down the hall. The door was still open. The light was dim. There was that sound again. Her heart jumped. She identified the sound as her eyes adjusted to the light. It was coming from the huge fireplace on the opposite side of the room. The beautiful high-back sofa was facing the fireplace, which crackled as cindered logs broke and released embers.

Sam found a small lamp on a table and turned it on. It only caused more shadows. A tiny bar was next to the fireplace, its cabinet door ajar. Her eyes were drawn to an iron-wrought gate on the right side of the room. A white spotlight shone through casting a shadow on the floor. Black vines seemed to be growing out of the rug. She walked toward it. There was a small grotto shaped like a circular tube that had been cut in half. Its height and width was a bit larger than her body. *It looks like a coffin.* Protruding out of the wall was a Madonna statue, a discarded symbol of Catholicism, which seemed to have been carved out of the rock. Gracing her neck was a silver cross. The light from the ceiling of the grotto displayed a brightly colored mural on both sides of the statue. It was an amazing piece of work. She tried to touch the statue, but there was a pane of glass in back of the gate.

More paintings decorated the wall surrounding the grotto. These were solely of women. Reubens, Botticellis. Sam's eyes rested on a huge portrait above the fireplace. She was in awe as she walked in front of the portrait. There was no mistaking the faces staring back at her. The portrait had been done when they were in their 20's. It was a beautiful pose, a simple one. Cil had her arms draped around her mother's stomach; her mother's hands over Cil's. They were smiling. It was lovely. Why had she never seen this painting before? The faint smell of gin hit her. She turned around and gasped.

Lying on the sofa was a man. Although 'man' was not the first noun that jumped to mind. Her first thought was *angel*. He was in a cream-colored suit. He glowed in the light of the fire. A shadow was cast on one side of his face as he lay on his back his arms folded over his chest. His head rested on the arm of the couch. The light hinted at blond-brown hair and a beautifully formed face. *I'd kill for bone structure like that.* Sam knew she should go.

She began to walk toward the door when the man shifted on the couch. He was facing the fire, still sleeping. Sam's heart felt as if it had dropped into her stomach. *He's an angel. God sent him to rescue me.* She grinned. He reminded her of a painting she had seen of the Archangel Michael. He wasn't built large, but Sam guessed he was tall. His legs were bent so he could fit on the couch. He seemed as if he was used to the position; had done it for years. Sam didn't realize she was walking toward him. She bent down, making sure not to block the fire that illuminated his face.

He had a well-built nose, not sharp, but soft. Her eyes scanned him for some flaw or blemish. There was none. The firelight washed over his face like sunset over the ocean's surface. She stared. It seemed like hours. *I could look at him forever.* A lock of his hair fell over one eye. Fascinated, she studied the faint movement of his eye beneath his eyelid. Her hand came up to touch his face. It was an inch away from his right cheek when he moved, as if refusing her touch. Again, she saw his eyes move under his lids and realized he was dreaming. Then he spoke.

"No."

His mouth opened a fraction as he whispered it and his eyebrows crinkled together. Then he was silent and relaxed. His mouth remained slightly open. His lips were nice. Not too full. Just right. They had a slight pink tone in the firelight. As he dabbed at his lips with his tongue, Sam's breathing stopped. She was in a state of rapture. She felt very hot. Her hand was in mid-air. She brought it back down. Her face was inches away and she could smell him. He wasn't wearing cologne, it was just him. It was a soft, musky scent. What men should smell like. He breathed out. There was the faint smell of liquor. Whiskey? She looked to the open cabinet and noticed the bottle on the counter. Her eyes traced back to the couch and spotted an empty glass on the floor. Her stare went back to those long, bent legs, over his hip and chest 'til she was looking at his face. Sam watched him for a long time. How old is he? Can't be more than 20. Her heart beat faster.

"What are you doing here?" Her head swam from the wine as her balance left her. "Have you come for me?"

You have permission to take me. She moved closer. She felt his breath on her chin. What's your name? Where'd you come from? What if he wakes up? Who knows what he'd do? She stood up. Besides Cil is probably wondering what the hell happ...

Cil was in the doorway. Sam almost screamed. Her heart made its way from her chest all the way out of her throat. She rocked back clumsily. Cil beckoned with her finger. Sam took one more look at the sleeping figure and followed Cil out into the hallway. Cil motioned for her to shut the door. Once they were in her office, Cil sat down.

"You're red," Cil stated flatly.

Sam put her hand to her cheek and felt the heat. "Must be the wine. I'm sorry, I..."

"What, Sam? What were you doing?"

Sam felt like a child who had been messing around in her mother's closet. "I was just looking around."

"Did you like what you saw?"

Sam laughed. "Yes. The painting of you and mother...I've never seen it before."

"Beautiful, isn't it? It was done 23 years ago."

Sam nodded. "That man...on the couch...um...who is he?"

Cil stood up. "That's Alex."

She pushed the button to the elevator. There was a long silence. Sam bit her lip. A bell rang. The doors opened and they walked in. As the doors closed, Cil stared straight ahead.

"He's my son."

"How...what do you...?" The words wouldn't come.

She played with one of the curls on Sam's shoulder. "I was hoping I'd have more time to tell you this. I wasn't expecting Alex tonight."

The bell rang and they were in the aquarium hallway. Sam felt glued to the ground. Cil grabbed her by her shoulders and led her into the club. Five minutes later they made their way into the bathroom. Cil locked the door with her key. Sid noticed them from the back of the bar and asked if they needed help. Cil refused. Tom watched in an amused state of bewilderment.

Sam sat on the small couch staring at nothing. "He's beautiful."

Cil laughed. "Not the first complete thought I expected to pop out of your mouth, but I'm not

complaining. Yes, he is beautiful."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't Mom tell me? Did she know?"

"Yes." Cil's smile faded. "It was as much for your protection as for Alex's. You couldn't know anything. It was too dangerous."

"Where was he, all those times you came to visit?"

"He was taken care of."

Sam knew she was not going to get many details. Details she suddenly felt she needed. She wondered how this woman could have kept a son a secret.

"How old is he?"

"Just turned 22."

My age. "He doesn't look it."

"No. He can pass for 18. But it works to his advantage."

Sam got a feeling in her stomach as if it were churning up every meal she had ever consumed. No. Please don't tell me that perfect creature... She realized the absurdity of assuming anything else. What else would he do but sell himself? Look at what he was brought up in. Of course he does this.

"How long has he been working for you?"

Cil's face clouded over. "He wanted to start at 13. Some women feed off that. That innocent factor. That control." Cil's face twisted in disgust. "They're sick; molesters, pedophiles. My ops have to be 16. No exceptions. He thought I'd give in." Cil pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "He wanted to make his own money, pay for his own things." She laughed uncomfortably. "He looked 9 when he was 13, so small and thin. I knew there would be a market for him. He knew it, too." She got up and paced. "It was around 15 he shot up so fast. Grew about a foot in six months. Looked like another person. Even thinner. He knew he would be ready soon and willed himself to grow. Preparations." She took long drags on her cigarette and sat back down. "He had his first encounter on his 16th birthday."

Sam didn't want to hear anymore. That image of the angel sleeping. Innocent, peaceful. It was fading from memory.

"He did it for a year, non-stop clubbing. Made a nice stash then disappeared. I'd get messages through friends letting me know he was doing fine. He was out of the States most of those two years. He traveled everywhere. Then, one day, he dropped back in Vegas telling me he was ready to go back to work. He breaks from it quite a lot, though. Now he can only go for a few months at a time, then he'll run off, show up two months later."

"Is he...in demand?" Sam already knew the answer.

"Incredibly. You know, at first I didn't think it would work. He's not what a lot of women expect. He has this presence about him, though. He adapts. He turns into whatever a woman wants. One day, he can play the innocent. The next night he's a conqueror. He has a sense. Should have been an actor, if he would have ever been given the chance. But then, they have to be, don't they? Some are better at it. Alex is one of those. I always thought the two of you would get along. I remember how badly your mom and I wished you two could spend time together when you were little. That wasn't possible. It was frustrating and hopeless, the situation."

"Did Mom ever meet him?"

"We couldn't risk anything that could be traced. She never saw any pictures past the age of two. I'd

describe how he was growing. Sarah and I would compare notes, to see if you were at the same stage of development." Cil looked nostalgic. "Those times were a lot easier."

"Does he know about us?"

"No. Nothing."

Sam tried to imagine how he must have felt. A prisoner. The curiosity he must have had about so many things and his inability to experience them.

"It wasn't possible, Sam. It would be like committing suicide, giving a young male that kind of information about the women I knew. There's always the chance of that getting into the wrong hands. Your mom would have been punished for knowing about it. I know that's one of the things he resents, the secrecy of everything. There's no way to apologize for it. I did it for him and everyone else in my life that I love." Cil walked over to the couch and grabbed Sam's hand. "This is important. If you meet him you can't tell him anything. Not the truth, anyway."

She pulled her hand away and began pacing. "What do I tell him?"

"I'm going to let him know you're a new client. You came down to look. That's all. I don't want to hit him with everything else yet. I don't know how he'll react to knowing I had this extended family that he didn't have a clue about. God, this is not happening the way I'd planned."

"Well, I don't have to confront him tonight. I'll leave in an hour or so."

"He'll probably be waking up by then. Hard trip. I think that might be best. I would like the two of you to meet under better circumstances."

"We almost did meet. If you hadn't come in and he woke up..."

"I knew I shouldn't have left you alone. I thought it would only be a minute to take care of a problem Tom was having downstairs. I forgot what you can get yourself into in a minute."

Sam laughed. This was a night of discovery. She realized she would have to deal with whatever happened or else pack it in and head back to Verona. She wasn't ready for that, yet. Her thoughts returned to the room Alex was in.

"What about the painting of you and Mom? Did he ever ask about that woman?"

"He loved that painting when he was little. I told him it was a friend that I had lost touch with. He was satisfied. I remember when he was five I caught him on top of a chair. He was trying to touch our faces. It was so cute. Kind of like what you were trying to do to him tonight."

Sam blushed and fell into the chair. "I don't know what it was." Her hands covered her face. "It was like I didn't have control over what I was doing."

"It was attraction, plain and simple." Cil pulled her hands away from her face. "There's one more thing you need to know before you get any fantasies in your head."

"It's too late for that."

"This is his job. He seduces for a living. No matter how much attention any man in this club shows you, they are getting paid to do it."

"I know that."

"Sam." Cil looked her in the eyes. "He's homosexual."

The sentence struck her like a slap across the face. The sight of him had made her lose normal thought processes. The word 'homosexual' floated in her head above the thoughts speeding together, creating a

mental cyclone. He doesn't like women. Makes sense. What did you think? That he was going to see you, fall in love, and take you away with him? Yeah, I was thinking that. That he would ravish me right there. And not have to be paid to do it. Because he wanted to. Because he wanted me.

"I figured he might be. You told me it's an even mix working the scene." She looked down at the floor.

"I'm sorry," Cil said.

"What are you sorry for?"

"I saw you look at him. I watched you for a while. You were in..."

"I was in ecstasy...right? Anyway, I can still dream can't I?"

You can do more than that...if you want. Sam dismissed the suggestion and got up.

"I think it's time to rejoin the party."

Chapter 12

~ Counterparts ~

Alex heard a bell. He opened his eyes, scanning the area. He relaxed when he identified the surroundings. He sat up, put his fingers to his forehead, and rubbed his temples. *God, I hate these fucking club trips.* He remembered the car ride. The trip lasted a week, even stealing a few hours of sleep during the day and driving all night. The drive through California was a nightmare. Dante was going to shit himself when they almost drove into a roadblock. The nightly excursion through the Mexico border hadn't been a picnic either. *Not a good week.*

Two hours of sleep was enough. It would get him through the evening. A popper would help even more, but he knew how Cil would react. *Got to stay on her good side.* Not an easy feat since she was pissed when he showed up tonight. He recalled her greeting as the elevator door in the drawing room opened.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Well...good to see you, too. No hug...no kiss?"

He walked into the drawing room and lay on the couch. Cil was looking at the portrait above the fireplace when the door opened. Her head spun to the right in shock. Her glass fell out of her hand spilling the clear contents on the rug.

"Who let you in?"

"Sid. Nice setup. Good idea having a separate entrance from your art office to the meat market. This place is unbelievable. Hell of a lot better security than the Vegas club. What's wrong with you? Thought you'd be happy to see me."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting you." Cil got out her handkerchief and cleaned up the spill.

"I'll get a towel."

When he came back Cil was situated on the couch. He thought he saw her hands shaking.

"To make a short story long I ran into Dante in Vancouver a week ago. He asked if I wanted to trek down with him. He got around to telling me about the message he got in Seattle about the club opening in Morrah. I figured you were having a hard time locating me. I was hiking, no access to a phone. So I joined him for the ride."

Cil smiled. "Oh."

"You didn't want me to come?"

"Well, you did tell me you needed a break from this. I didn't think you'd be interested."

"Come on, it's Morrah for Christ sake. The big one." He smiled. "The truth is, I'm running low on funds. Thought I could make some money."

Cil stood up. "No problem. Seven days work...\$2,000."

He left the wash towel in a square in front of the fireplace to soak up the gin. "Actually, I was hoping I could get in on some of the sweeter action."

"You remember what happened last time?"

"That wasn't my fault."

"It was your stupidity that got you in that predicament. You almost got yourself killed. If I hadn't been watching...."

"The background check isn't my job, Cil."

"No, but how you handle yourself is. You know you have to follow the contract explicitly. It's for your safety."

He grabbed a glass from the cabinet and poured himself some whiskey. "She offered me an extra \$1,000 if she could tie me up."

"And then slit your throat with a razor blade she hid in the heel of her shoe."

He sat on the couch. "I admit, that was an ingenious hiding spot. That castrater knew her shit." He downed the drink. "Look, I learned my lesson." He motioned his fingers over a spot on the side of his neck. "You can barely see the scar. I'll follow the rules."

Cil looked down at him. "I'll have to think about it. We've got some time. I might be able to line up something on the last night. Can't promise anything. For now..."

"For now, I'm going to crash here. Get some sleep before the action begins."

She kissed him on the cheek and gave him a hug. "Welcome back."

He smelled the rosewater on her neck. He loved that smell. He knew he was home. Before she walked out the door, she turned.

"Do me a favor? Don't go downstairs. Wait for me. I'll probably be in and out all night. I have to brief you about one of our clients."

He leaned back on the arm of the sofa. She closed the door and Alex dozed off. Two hours later he was ready to work. He stood up and cursed himself for wearing his jacket as he napped. It was wrinkled; not the look he was going for. He took it off and laid it on the sofa. He would take a trip up to the storage room and find something suitable.

He looked around. There was something different about the room. He remembered smelling the spilt gin as he fell asleep. Now, there was a different aroma. Lilac. He looked down and noticed the towel was wrinkled and twisted. There was the faint impression of a heel in the middle of it. *Someone was here. A woman. And it wasn't Cil.* He picked up the towel. No way another woman could have gotten in unnoticed. Unless Ri was back. Alex shivered at the thought of Ri being in the room with him while he was sleeping, defenseless. He walked in the bathroom and soaked the towel in the sink. As the faucet ran he got an urgent need to relieve himself.

"Damn, I thought I took care of this."

Even need permission to perform a biological function. He turned off the water. The smell hit him again. *What the hell? She took a piss while she was here.*

"Hey, Cil..."

He walked into the office. Empty. *She wanted me to do something? What the hell was it?* Shrugging he went back into the drawing room and opened the iron gate. He stepped inside the grotto elevator containing the mural and Madonna statue. He turned to face the statue. His head touched the ceiling and he was forced to hunch down. He pressed the cross on the statue's chest and felt the movement of the elevator traveling upward. He raised his eyebrows in a mocking seductive gesture.

"How you doin' tonight?"

Quiet ride. No wonder I scared the shit out of her. I'll get myself a new jacket and then track her.

down. The fact that an unknown woman had been in Cil's office shook him. And that smell. In Cil's aboveground office a panel in the wall hid the grotto/elevator. Alex remembered being curious when Sid led him into Cil's office to find it vacant. Sid pressed a few buttons on his power-pad, the panel slid open, and Sid invited him in. They're certainly getting sophisticated.

As the panel revealed its secret the office Ri looked up from her ledger. She always seemed calm and cool...a constant state of slow motions. It was as if her life had been an easy journey where everything fell into place. She was Cil's age, but looked well preserved. Must be all that blood she feasts on.

Alex didn't pretend to be cordial. He disliked her and wanted her to know it. She simply ran this place as, unfortunately, the store that it was. Used the men for profit. He hated the fact that he needed a woman like her to survive. He didn't have to put on a show. Sucking up to her wouldn't do any good, anyway. Her feelings were mutual.

"I need a jacket. I'm sure you could set me up with something. Want to look good tonight."

"Not that you don't already look stunning."

She leaned back and surveyed the merchandise. She waved her pen in the air with a circular motion. Alex knew the cue and turned around in a complete circle.

"You might want to get more than a jacket." She went over to the safe, ledger in hand. "Are you secure?"

Alex sighed. "Of course. Sid gave me the goods when I came in. He took care of it."

"You know the drill. You have to be checked by all curators. You shouldn't have even been allowed in tonight. You're not on the guest list. I'll have to talk to Sid."

"It's not Sid's fault. I tagged along with Dante. If you want me out of here, just say so."

She turned to look him over. "I wouldn't dream of it. You're always one of our biggest money-makers. In the blood, I suppose. Drop your pants."

Ri walked over, a keycard in hand.

"Turn around."

He felt her icy hand on his back as she checked his underwear. He had been outfitted with a 24th-century version of the chastity belt when he came in. The material was impenetrable: unable to be cut, ripped, or burned off. Only the keycard could unlock the magic. If the belt was tampered with, an alarm alerted his location and the wearer was shocked in a sensitive spot. It was reported that when one male intent on having sex without consent tried to take it off he was shocked into unconsciousness. Upon waking, he found his main money-maker unable to perform its God-given function. Rumors also circulated that this poor fellow plummeted into a period of depression and killed himself. She slipped the keycard into the lock, checking the code.

"Okay, you're all set." Alex pulled up his pants as Ri walked back to the safe.

"If you'll lead the way, I can let you get on with business."

Alex hated being in a room alone with her. Not that it happened often. Ri was only at two or three club openings a year. It was obvious she felt that Cil was a soft touch. But Alex also knew that Cil could move merchandise like nobody else. The money factor made up for that. It always did. A Cil club opening was like no other. They needed her. Thankfully, for Alex, he came along in the package deal.

Ri shut the safe and walked out. Alex noticed the high heel shoes she was wearing.

"Were you in Cil's office downstairs about an hour ago?"

She stared back in one of her 'I'm the Master' moods and barely acknowledged his existence. They walked up a flight of steps. Alex stood behind her as she pulled open the door. The force caused a breeze. Alex faintly smelled her perfume. It was that strong, spicy smell as always. *Not lilac*. He followed her in and took one minute to find a well-fitting blue blazer. There was only one more thing to take care of before the big night began. Wearing a grin that stretched from ear to ear, Alex turned to Ri.

"I need to piss."

Chapter 13

~ Darlings ~

He spent a half-hour caressing the woman's hand. She had an Oedipal complex of some kind. She had been buzzing around the underage ops all night. *First-night surveyors, deciding on which piece they want for a night.* As soon as Alex walked into the club his routine settled in. He chatted with Paolo for a few minutes. Paolo had a thing for him. Alex remembered the first words Paolo said to him three years ago: 'you look like an excellent fuck'. Alex had thanked him and then released signals letting him know he was in no way interested. He didn't need another disaster. Michael had been enough. Michael turned out to be enough for a lifetime.

Two years with Michael had ruined him for all other men. They were all walking dildos in comparison. And once it was over that comparison destroyed all other relationships. *Not that you could call them relationships.* It was just sex. Empty sex. He had never truly enjoyed sex or understood the fascination with it until Michael. The main reason was the immediate trust he felt with Michael. They had connected as soon as they saw each other in a pool hall in Vancouver. Michael had a presence. He was calm and incredibly solid. An extremely well built body displayed nicely through a tight shirt and jeans, and dark features made him the complete opposite of the gangly boy Alex had transformed into around his 17th birthday. Alex was pale, loud, and liquid in his movements.

They watched each other play for a while before Alex asked if he wanted to share a table. Alex studied him. He was not much for secret glances. If interested, there was no reason not to examine it. Michael would lean into the table for a shot and Alex would lean with him at the other end to get a good look at his face. There was no need to hide the fact that he was intrigued. His presence mystified him. The man could say everything with one gesture. As the game continued they began conversing. Michael was direct. Usually Alex would take that as meaning the other party was uninterested in chatting. However, he knew that was not the case with this one. That was how Michael worked. He was 20, an underground laborer, and ready to leave Vancouver.

They played pool and talked over beers. They had sex in one of the bathroom stalls before closing. It was exciting and enjoyable. Alex had taken the initiative, inviting him into the confined area. Michael pinned him against the cold wall and kissed him, tangling his fingers in the blond strands. As Alex felt the heat rise he returned the kiss with fierce passion. Michael let him take over as they leaned from one wall to the other. Alex explored him, taking in the contours of his body. He stroked Michael's growing erection first over, then inside his jeans. Alex moaned as they sucked on each other's mouths. He felt his arousal grow and wasted little time. Michael knelt in front of him as Alex watched him suck on him. When he could take no more, he handed Michael a condom he had been holding in his hand. Michael slipped it on and allowed Alex to take him first before the act was reciprocated 10 minutes later, this time with Alex suiting Michael up. The intensity left them both gasping. Alex had made an impression.

Alex told Cil the next morning he was taking time off and went with Michael to Europe. They spent a year and most of their combined earnings traveling together. Alex felt satisfied. He felt this would work. He could spend the rest of his life with this person and be content. Then, one morning, after a week in Vienna, he woke up and found Michael packing.

"We're leaving already?" He looked at the clock. "We've got the room 'til 6:00."

"I'm leaving."

He sat up in the bed. "What?"

"I can't do this anymore. I thought it was enough, but it's not."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The night before they had made love for hours. He hadn't heard a complaint from him. He walked over to the fridge. He found the last beer of the six-pack and stood in front of the open fridge door, naked, drinking. It invigorated him, the cold air that flowed from the icebox. He knew Michael was watching him.

"Alex, do you love me?"

Michael was sitting at the foot of the bed. He sat next to him and put his arm around him.

"You know I love you." He kissed his neck. "How many times do I have to say it?"

"How many times will you have to say it until you believe it? How many times are we going to fuck ourselves into believing you love me? I don't have to make myself believe it, because it's there. Right there for you to do what you want with. But I can't go along with it anymore." Michael dissolved into tears. "As much as I love you, I need it back. You can't give it to me. Not the way I need it. It's not real for you. It never was."

Alex turned away from Michael. He stared at the floor bent over with his hands clenched in front of him. He couldn't look at him.

"Sure, the sex is great. We're pals. We like the same things, same places. We're fuck buddies. But it's a game, like everything else in your screwed up way of thinking."

"How can you say that?" Alex noticed the scuff marks on the polished wood floor.

"It's true. It only took me a year to figure it out...or admit it to myself. You're very good, you know. At hiding things. In fact, you're so good you don't even realize it yourself."

"Realize what? That I don't love you? That I'm an immature brat waiting for the chance to fuck you over? Where the hell is this coming from? Last night...Christ, what are you trying to do? If this is your way of getting out of spending time with me at least give me a sensible reason. How long have you been thinking about this? You're talking shit. I've loved you more than I've loved any other man in my life. If you want to leave, just say so. Don't make stupid excuses full of shit. And don't tell me you have any idea of how I really feel!"

He walked over to his bag and dressed. He had to do something with his hands or he was going to kill him. The jeans were put on quickly.

"Forget it."

A bag was zipped. A door was opened. Before he could finish his thought process, Alex ran to the door and shut it holding Michael captive. He stared at him, anger and hurt mixed together. He had grown another six inches over the past year and was able to look down at Michael. Even though Michael was stronger, it gave Alex a sense of accomplishment in some weird way. An ability to overpower him, if he thought about it. All those nights they spent together; all those thoughts and dreams they shared; in a moment they were gone. This was not the same person he had fallen asleep with last night. He wouldn't let him go like this. Not like this. A cocky smile played on Alex's lips. Michael just looked tired.

"You know, I'm actually curious. What is it? This great and profound thing you know about me? That I'm an insensitive idiot with no true feelings? That I'm a lousy lay? That I drink too much? That I pop too many pills? What is it, oh, great one?"

Michael looked him in the eyes. "No matter how much you think you love me you'll never love me the

way you could love a woman."

He froze. This could not be happening. How could this person who meant so much to him accuse him of such a vile perversity?

"I'm sorry, Alex. I know you have no idea. I've seen it for a while. I've seen the way you look at women. I've heard it in your stories. And this isn't my way of getting out of our relationship. I could have gone along with it longer. That's how much I love you." He stared at his shoes. "But it's a lie. I know you love me, but it's not the same. Even though you really do believe that you love me. You need something I can't give you. No matter how close we are something's missing. It kills me that I can't give it to you."

"You're wrong." It was Alex's turn for tears. "I've never felt this way about anyone. I've had plenty of women. They disgust me. How many times did I tell you how I scrub my skin raw after an encounter? They're sick, they're useless."

"You also said those aren't real women. Those are the vultures, the bitches. But you know what I think? There has to be something there for you to keep doing it. I think if you could find a woman...like your mother...who is in love with the idea of men, you could love her. I think you see that more everyday, having this freedom we have together. And no matter how hard you try, you can't love me that way. And no matter how hard I pretend, that's what I need."

Alex sputtered, but couldn't answer.

"Some men need women, to make them feel whole. Some men need men. The sooner you admit that, the sooner you'll find it. But if I stay, I'm going to end up hating you. It's happened before for different reasons. I don't want to do that to you. I don't want to deny you your chance at completing yourself."

Michael held Alex for a long time. Alex still didn't understand. He never would. It was just a way for Michael to get on with his life; to close the door. He hit Alex with something he couldn't deny because he couldn't comprehend it. It was so unbelievable. It was preposterous.

Alex spent his last few days in Vienna in a daze. A pleasure not allowed in the U.S., walking around in the daylight was his only source of comfort. When he came home a week later, he decided to test Michael's theory. He went to Vegas. Alex had never had sex with a woman without any monetary sustenance.

It was 3:00 AM. He was hiding in the shadows of an alley on Blue Street. He was resting his arms on his bent knees. Leaning against the dirty wall, he watched the occasional transport flash lights into the alley. He didn't care about getting caught by a guardian. He wanted to be exposed and punished for what he was: a man with a renegade penis. The drink and drugs told him life might be better if he were castrated. Perhaps he could be at peace. Sex would no longer be a factor. He would no longer have to sell himself. He could die. It would be over.

He fell asleep in that alley. When he woke up he was not surrounded by trash and brick walls. The walls were blue and a soft mattress was beneath him. He jumped up and scanned the room. Sitting in a chair across from him was a woman. She had a cup of coffee in her hand and was sipping it. Alex pulled the sheets off and stared down expecting to find a pool of blood where his organ used to be. He was fully clothed and nothing had been removed.

Her name was Anna and she was 18. She worked at a supermarket across town and went to community college part time. She had seen him in the alleyway next to her apartment building as she was coming home from the night shift. She knew the guardians were doing sweeps of the neighborhood for ops.

"I was so shocked when I saw you." She gave him a cup of coffee. "I can't believe nobody saw you."

"So you brought me into your home? Do you usually do this? You know you can get arrested for having me here."

"You were pretty easy to drag into the apartment. Seemed rather willing. I was going to call the guards as soon as I dumped you on the bed. But then I watched you sleep for a few hours and figured you couldn't be that bad."

Drunken amnesia was sometimes a blessing. "Why not?"

"I recognized you."

"From where?"

She sat down on the bed. She pulled up his shirt and touched his stomach. He reached for her shirt and pulled it up. He recognized the mark above her navel: two small circles locked together. It was the mark of true conception. He traced it with his finger.

"My parents lived underground for five years before my father was found."

"Mine was killed when I was two," she said.

They talked for a long time. He'd only seen one other person with the symbol before. That was his mother. When he was younger she had spoken about the faith that she and his father belonged to. It was a special thing to conceive a child the way God intended, without any intrusion by science. That was why she still did what she did; to bring men and women together. He told Anna what he did for a living.

"I've heard of those places, but I don't think I could bring myself to go there."

"Did you ever want to?"

He could feel her melting. They spent that night together. She didn't ask if he was positive. She didn't seem to care. The use of protection was routine and he went about it as he did before any encounter. She whispered that she had never been with anyone before, man or woman. He made love to her. Something he had never done with a woman. It was beautiful. But that was all. He thanked her. She thanked him. He went back to Cil. He cried in her lap, telling her everything. There was nothing she could say to comfort him. She didn't know what was in his heart. Only he could know. And unfortunately, his confusion was growing.

Paolo managed to make his way into the booth. He was feeling up Ms. Oedipus Rex. Alex was always disgusted by Paolo's vulgar actions. *Who does he think he's bullshitting?* Alex rested his head on the table. He tried to figure if he could make it through the last hour. He'd have to get a full night's earnings. Sid was keeping close tabs on everyone. He could hear the woman's soft moans and Paolo's Spanish whispers. He was about to doze off when he was awakened by the scent...*lilac*.

Alex monitored the entire room. He attempted to use his nose as a scent detector, moving this way and that. He climbed out of the booth. He heard Paolo's voice.

"Alex, where are you going?"

"I need to find someone. Trouble is, I have no idea what she looks like."

"Maybe I can help, huh...you know her name?"

The woman next to him was climaxing, oblivious to the chatter. Alex shook his head as he scanned the room.

"No, I only know what she smells like."

"What?"

"Her perfume. She's wearing lilac."

"Ah, lilac. Wait, I smelled lilac tonight. Which one was it?" Paolo searched the room. "No, I don't see her. But you can't miss this woman. She's magnificent. Well, if you're into that thing." He smiled devilishly. "She's wearing a white dress and she has brown hair. And she can't be any older than me."

"Thanks, man."

He allowed the couple some privacy. He walked around the club for five minutes, but couldn't spot the woman anywhere. Maybe she left already. Or maybe she went to the bathroom? Deciding to play spy, he sat at the end of the bar.

"Need anything?" Tom asked from behind the bar.

"No, just looking for someone."

Alex's breathing stopped. Even though he couldn't smell her, he knew. He saw her through the mirror of the aquarium. She was at a small table near one of the massive columns. She must have just sat down. He took in her profile as she watched the show on stage. He turned in the barstool so that he could get a better look. He noticed she held herself different than the other women in the club. It reminded him of Cil's relaxed posture. It was as if she had spent most of her life in this male atmosphere. She looked...not quite innocent but...fresh. That seemed right. Like the smell of lilac.

Her hair was up, curled neatly on top. Her face, cradled by her hand, was hard to see. He wanted to see her, but didn't want to draw attention to himself. She crossed one leg over the other and absently played with one of the curls that cascaded down to her shoulder. She clapped when the performance was done. Still, he couldn't see enough of her.

"I don't think she's shopping tonight."

He looked at Tom. "Which one?"

"The lady in white. She's Cil's guest tonight."

"Cil brought her?" Tom nodded. "What's her name?"

"Sam."

Sam. That must be the one Cil had to tell me about. Initiation maybe.

"Do you know if Cil's in her office?"

"I'll check." He rang the office.

Alex watched Sam for a few more moments. Sid sat down next to her. He couldn't remember the last time he saw Sid so animated. *Well, well, Sid...still got it in ya.*

"She's waiting for you. Doesn't sound too happy."

"Shit." He walked behind the bar. "If I'm not back in 20 minutes call the guards."

He slapped Tom on the shoulder. In the doorway he turned to glimpse the new blood. She stood up and headed toward the bar. He made his way behind the aquarium, staring through the glass. *That's it. A little closer. We want to get a good look.* She leaned over the counter laughing. He could hear it echo through the glass. It was loud, not quite what he expected. She reminded him of the women that graced Cil's paintings, a renaissance creation. Her features were round and soft, except for her nose. It

was sharp, chiseled out of marble, the nostrils too wide for the rest of her face. If not for that, she would be perfect. The skin was like porcelain. The brown eyes were vibrant, taking everything in. He wondered what Cil could have to tell him concerning this woman.

When the elevator door opened Cil was waiting for him. "This better be good, Alex."

"I don't have a good reason why I didn't wait for you in your office. It was my attire."

"Ri filled me in a few minutes ago."

"Good old Ri. Can always count on her to screw me over."

"You don't need to count on anyone for that. You handle that quite well yourself."

"Well, I'd really love to continue this entertaining banter, but I need to get back to work."

"You're done for tonight." Cil walked into her office.

"I'm not gonna argue. I know I've made a complete mess for you."

She sat behind her desk. "Don't worry, you'll get paid for a full night."

He sighed. "Thanks."

Cil checked her messages and answered a call from Ri. Alex waited to be dismissed. Acting like an employee for his own mother was something he never got used to. When she finished with the call, she looked up.

"Anything else?"

"Didn't you have to tell me something about one of the clients? I'm assuming that's why you were so pissed at me."

"I wanted to fill you in on one of our new possible initiations this week."

"Sam?"

Cil froze for a second. "You've talked to her?"

"No. I saw her. Tom filled me in."

"What did Tom tell you?"

"That she's your guest. Since when do you offer freebies? Too generous for Ri, I'm sure."

"Ri's not in charge of how I acquire buyers. Anyway, Sam's new to all this as you might have been able to tell."

"She looks it, yeah. Where's she from?"

"You know, that's none of your concern."

"Think she might be interested in me?"

"Whatever she's interested in, I want you to make sure you approach her carefully, not too many questions. She's paranoid. But I think you might be what she's looking for."

Didn't seem paranoid to me. "OK. Got it."

"Now, get out of here. Meet me tomorrow morning. For breakfast."

"Alright." Alex headed toward the hallway. "Night, Mom."

Cil smiled. "Good night, Alex."

Chapter 14

~ Proposition ~

Sam couldn't sleep. The reason was obvious. She would meet Alex face to face in a few hours.

"Do you think it's a good idea?" Sam had asked Cil.

"You're going to meet eventually, might as well be tomorrow."

"What if something slips out? I don't want to complicate things."

"You can't possibly make it any worse, believe me. Besides, it's an introductory meeting. He can be pushy, though. Just keep guarded. I'll be there in case things get messy."

"He won't be suspicious about the whole set up?"

"He'll think you're interested in an encounter. He's been through this more times than I care to recall."

Sam looked up at the ceiling. *I wonder what color his eyes are. What it would be like to look into them.* Nervousness filled her stomach. She managed to drift off, though she awoke with a monstrous headache due to the alcohol. She popped a few pills. The loud ringing of the ancestral phone startled her as she finished putting on a pair of pants.

"Hello?"

"Samantha dear, are you ready?"

"Just about." Her stomach tightened.

"Sid is waiting for you in the lobby. He'll be taking you to breakfast."

"Breakfast?"

"There's a lovely outdoor spot by the beach. Alex and I will meet you there."

"Whoa, wait a minute. No slow introduction? No easy meeting? Just walk in, boom, nice to meet you, how's about some breakfast?"

Cil sighed. "There's no way I could make this meeting easy. Let's give it a try, alright?"

Sid drove the two of them in the car. "Be careful with Alex. He can be very disarmin'. He's really good at his job."

Sam looked out the window. "That's what everyone tells me. You don't think it's a good idea...meeting him?"

"If he's what you want, why shouldn't you? It's just that I've known Alex for a long time. Don't read too much into his act. That's what it is, an act."

"I know."

"He's a good guy, though."

"Do you spend a lot of time together, being that he's Cil's son and all?"

"When we were younger. I used to think he was a pain in the ass. He was nine and I was 12. He was like a little brother. I could not get him to leave me alone. He would always be buggin' me to play around and stuff. But as we got older I found out he wasn't that bad."

Sam remembered the image of last night. Alex sleeping. The beautiful profile. Watching Sid she compared the two in her mind. *They could pass for brothers.*

"Here we are."

The tiny restaurant was a beach hut similar those that lined the beaches in Verona. Sam didn't wait for Sid to get her door. He leaned against the hood of the car.

"I'll be waitin' for you."

"You're not coming?"

"Not my business." He sat back in the driver's seat.

Sam took a deep breath and walked inside. The hostess told Sam that her party was waiting out on the deck. Sam looked toward the back of the restaurant at the opening that gave her a glimpse of the beach. She couldn't see anything, except a few tables with umbrellas in front of the golden sand that met the gray of the water.

The hostess looked at her. "Are you alright? I could call your party and have them meet you in here." Her stomach was doing back flips. "Could I use your bathroom?"

"Of course." The woman showed her the way.

As soon as the door was shut she ran to the toilet and doubled over. A few minutes later, she sat on the bathroom floor.

"Hello...Miss?"

Sam picked herself up off of the floor. "Yes?"

"Do you need any assistance? Should I call someone?"

"No."

She went to the sink. After gargling she popped a breath mint and stared at herself in the mirror. She was no longer the bombshell from the previous evening. She pulled her braid forward. Scared Sam looked back at her from the reflection. She crunched down on the mint and tried to think of how she could get out of this mess. Sid was waiting. They could make a quick getaway back to the gallery. She scowled at herself, not pleased with the coward staring back. She yanked the door open and was met by his grin. Sam stopped breathing.

"We were worried about you. Madeline said you weren't feeling well."

Alex felt fortunate to have this chance to get to talk to her without Cil around. The way she had talked, he knew an encounter was a possibility. Since no one knew much about the mystery woman his interest had been piqued. Bios of any buyer were always scarce. But no one knew anything about this one. Not even what she might want to buy. Sid was of no use, either. It was comical the way he tensed up when he asked him about Sam last night.

When the restroom door opened a different woman greeted him. Not the one he had glimpsed through the aquarium. Her hair had been put into a braid that fell across the front of her blue sleeveless shirt. There were still a few curls framing the sides of her face. She was wearing white pants that were baggy for her figure. He noticed all of this before she made eye contact and all motion in her face stopped. He took in her features. They were the same. Only the ease in her face was gone. She looked helpless. Trapped. Alex saw her fall. He managed to grab her by the waist and lean her against him. The hostess was behind him, alarmed.

"I'll get Cil."

"No, Madeline, it's alright. She just fainted. Help me get her into the bathroom."

Madeline put down the toilet seat so he could sit her on it. "I'll get some smelling salts."

She ran out and Alex bent down cradling her head with one hand and supporting her body with the other. Her skin was pale. Beads of sweat dotted her face. Her mouth was slightly open. After a few seconds that smell filled his nostrils. *Lilac.*

"Alex?"

He looked up. "She passed out."

Cil ran to Sam's side. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing. I said two words and the next thing I know she's out."

"She had too much to drink last night. The excitement of this morning probably didn't help either."
Cil stroked her face. "I'll take care of it."

"I can help."

"You being here when she wakes up might not help the situation."

He sighed. "Alright. Hold her up or she'll fall right off."

Madeline entered with the smelling salts and Alex took his cue and went outside. Sam bolted out of her seat. The pungent odor jerked her back to reality. The walls were familiar. So was Cil. It was the other woman standing above her that brought the events flooding back.

"Oh, shit." She put her hand to her head.

"Are you okay?"

"No. Would a sane woman pass out in a bathroom for no particular reason?"

"I can take you to a doctor."

"There's no need for that."

"I'll get you some water." Madeline left them alone.

"I want to go home."

Cil went limp. "I know you're scared, but you're not letting yourself be open to this."

"I can't even look him in the eyes without fainting."

"Maybe you should meet someone else, then."

Sam shook her head. "No."

"I won't push. Not if it makes you ill. I never wanted that. Let me tell him you've changed your mind and we'll go back to the gallery and make arrangements for you to head back."

Sam was left with a gnawing in her stomach.

Alex listened at the door. The voice was weak. The strong laughter was gone. He stifled a laugh when she made reference to her sanity. He had wondered about that himself. It didn't make sense. Last night she was so comfortable, so enthralled around a horde of males. She had confidently walked up to the bar and engaged in a conversation with Tom. Now she sounded like a child. The way Cil talked to her it was apparent that they knew each other quite well. Alex pondered that as he made his way to the deck.

Chapter 15

~ Apologies ~

Sam stood in the middle of the gallery staring at the paintings. It was noon and she had managed to put a tiny bit of food in her stomach.

"I'll make the arrangements when I get back." Cil looked at her. "Maybe you should get upstairs and rest."

"I will."

"Ri is out. If you need anything, Lauren is in the office."

Sam nodded and Cil was off. All the excitement left her spent. Alex's face was burned into her memory. Even when she closed her eyes, she could see the outlines of his features floating in the darkness. It made her shiver and Sid looked concerned on their way back to the gallery. It was like electric currents passed through her. She made her way to a bench that overlooked the garden from a large picture window. With her legs propped up on it, she sat enjoying the view.

"Excuse me," Lauren interrupted. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I thought you should know before you panic..."

"What is it?"

"Someone wants to see you. Very determined, I might add. I've contacted Sid."

Sam's heart fell. "To see me? Who?"

"Alex, Cil's son."

The palpitations came back. She smacked her cheek. Lauren looked shocked.

"Where is he?"

She pointed toward the garden. "He's not allowed in before club hours. I asked him to leave, but he insisted. I finally talked him into waiting in the garden. It's a diversion until I can get Sid to take care of it before things get messy."

Sam looked back out the window. Alex was walking below it shuffling his feet. He was in a blue suit. His hands were stuffed in his pockets. He was overdressed, very ornate. However his bright colors blended into the colorful garden beautifully.

"How can I get to the garden?"

"I can't let you see him alone. Against policy."

"I understand. But I've made a fool of myself in front of a lot of people. I'd like to apologize and explain my ridiculous behavior."

"I can have Sid give him a note."

Sam looked back down at the garden. There was a slight breeze. The trees, flowers, and bushes swayed. A few of the blond-brown locks of his hair flew around. His bangs were long. His hands left his pockets for a few seconds to push his hair back.

"He's Cil's son, not some maniac. Doesn't that count for anything? I'll be fine. You can watch from the window. Technically, I won't be seeing him alone."

"Cil made things very clear. I'm responsible for you."

"I take full responsibility for what I'm doing."

Lauren shook her head. "I can't."

"What can't you do?" Sid's voice filled the gallery.

Sam pointed down toward the garden. Sid looked.

"He's here to see you?" Sid gave Lauren a nod. "I've got this."

"I'll be sure to let Cil know you've got it." She walked back to the front office.

"Are you responsible for me?" Sam glanced at Alex on a bench similar to hers.

"Guess so."

"Do you trust me to go down there by myself?"

"It's not a matter of me trustin' you."

"I know...it's Alex."

"Cil would read me the riot act."

"She's not here and she doesn't have to know."

"Okay, this is the offer. Take it or leave it." Sid stood by the gallery's back entrance. "I'm 20 feet away if you need me. Just call and I'll be around the corner in a second."

"Thanks."

Sam walked toward the garden. When she turned the corner she would confront him. But she had the advantage of surprise. He would know she was not a complete idiot. That was important to Sam. And anyway, he came to her this time. There was something he wanted to say. Sam wanted to hear it.

He was on the bench, his back toward her. She hugged the corner of the wall with one arm. Her knees were going. The wind picked up whipping his hair around for a second. Looking down, she saw the peculiar foot tapping he was doing. He sighed loudly and was up. She prepared herself. He displayed a comical look of being caught off-guard. It faded. It was in that one moment that Sam saw the act take over. His nervousness and indecisiveness was gone. Sam took the first step.

"Hello, Alex."

A few strands of his hair bobbing in front of his eyes. He deftly tossed his head to the side, sending them out of his view.

"Hello."

It was hard to look at him. She could feel her face redden. There were only furtive glances as she concentrated on the other objects in the garden. Every time her eyes returned to his, he was looking at her. Studying her. *Like Sid.* Her mind made an abstract connection. *His suit matches his eyes.* She tried looking at his shirt instead. It was pointless. The collar drew her eyes to his neck. Then back up to his face and those eyes.

"Maybe we should have a seat. Before you fall over."

There was that smugness. He arched his eyebrows, then pointed at the bench. She passed by him and sat down. He sat on the opposite side allowing plenty of space between them.

"I...I wanted to apologize for this morning." The sentence came out of her slowly.

"That's what I came to do. I figured I was the reason behind your fainting."

"It was stupid."

There was silence. She looked at his shoes. His feet were still.

"Cil told me you'll be leaving us soon."

She nodded. Her eyes went to the hand draped over the top of the bench. It was an inch away from her shoulder. It was as inactive as the rest of him. Sam looked at his face to make sure she wasn't hearing voices in her head. His lips moved carefully, wrapping around each sound. He licked his lips.
Another part of the act?

"Is it anything I've done?"

Sid's voice popped into her head. *He's really good at his job.*

"No, it's all me."

"I understand, well, actually, I have no understanding at all. I didn't want you to leave without meeting you. I saw you at the party last night." He looked at her with a bit of caution and something else. "If you change your mind I'd like the opportunity to spend some time with you."

Directly into her eyes the gaze fell. Sam was speechless. If she was conscious of the expression of awe on her face she would have slapped herself. He bowed his head politely.

"I should go. It was a pleasure meeting you." The smile was genuine.

Alex turned and walked toward the front gate. Sam ran the words through her mind. *He saw me at the party. I wonder when...did he know I was in the room when he was on the couch?*

"Sam?"

Sid's voice pushed through her thoughts. Getting up, she glanced at the path. There was no trace of Alex. Her heart sank. Sid glared past her toward the same path.

"What did he say?"

She crossed her arms, tugging at the braid. "He came to see if I was alright. I think he felt responsible for my 'condition'."

A smile came to his lips. "Come inside before Cil gets back."

Sid and Sam sat in the gallery for the rest of the afternoon. They drank coffee and commented on the art. He was very knowledgeable.

"I paint a bit myself," he said. "It's hard not to get a creative urge when you're around this all the time."

"What do you like to paint?"

"Still-life mostly...a few landscapes."

"Do you share them?"

He shook his head. "For my own self-indulgence."

"This stuff is great." She took a long sip of coffee.

"Can I ask you somethin'?' What is it about Alex?"

She paused. "I don't know, to be honest."

Sid finished his cup. "Maybe it's better you leave before you get hurt. You want to sleep with him. It's obvious."

Sam blushed. "That obvious?"

"Yes." He stood up. "I know I have no right to express my opinion."

"No, I'd like to know what you think."

"It'll never be what you want. Cil explained it to you, I'm sure. He'll go through the motions, but there'll always be somethin' missin'. If it's love you're searchin' for this is the wrong place to find it."

"I didn't come for love."

He nodded. "You came for the experience. But it won't be enough. You'll end up feelin' used, disappointed."

"You can't know how I'll end up feeling."

"No, just my assumption. It happens to some of our clients."

"You've been around this too long. Does it make you angry?"

"What?"

"The way the men are..." Sam searched for the words.

"Used? On display?" He shook his head. "That's the way it is. I don't feel one way or the other about it. It's a fact, the men are used for sex, the women for money. Each needs the other. It balances."

"Do you hate the women that come here?"

Sid looked at a painting. "I hate some women's ignorance. Then again, I don't like most of the men around here, either."

"Like Alex?"

"Alex is survivin' the best way he knows how."

"Is that how you feel?"

"Yes, I'm just workin' behind the stage, instead of on it."

Lauren's voice was heard echoing through the hall.

"For Cil's peace of mind, don't tell her about Alex."

Sid took Sam's cup and headed toward the hall. He nodded as Cil entered.

"Well, how are we doing?"

"Better."

"Good." She sat down next to Sam. "I'm going in my office to make the arrangements for your trip back. Unless you've changed your mind?"

"Am I completely ridiculous?"

"I couldn't even begin to guess what's going on in your head."

"Maybe I can stay a few more days. Think things over."

Cil smiled. "You're struggling bravely."

"I want to go and I want to stay." She cradled her head in her palms. "I feel like screaming. I've never been this confused about anything in my life."

"That's because it's important. Whatever you decide is going to impact your life. I had to choose like

you're choosing now. This is where it took me."

"Does it bother you that I'm having these feelings for Alex?"

"There's really no way I could stop you from having them."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

"Will you agree to it? If I decide he's what I want?"

Cil smiled. "Yes."

"I'm going up to my room."

Cil grabbed her hand and held it briefly before Sam walked away.

Chapter 16

~ Encounters ~

"Hear she pays top dollar. If you want cash she's the one to give your full attention to."

Dante pointed to the silver-haired, middle-aged woman sitting in the shadows. Alex finished his drink and tried to make enough eye contact to feel out the situation. Her eyes kept making their way to Paolo on the opposite side of the room.

"Not going to waste my time on a long shot."

It had been two days since the meeting in the garden. He kept himself in regular contact with Cil, checking to see if she had left. That was his ticket to some major income, he was sure of it. She would pay well. And even if she lost in the bidding she would help increase his going rate. The last encounter had made him \$10,000. Add that to the Attendance and Ambience pay or 'set dressing' and he had made himself \$12,000. It kept him going for a while. The rumor was that four women were interested in an encounter with him. If he played his cards right he could end up with a full house. The middle of the week was when the encounters began. A woman could only take so much teasing. Alex had at least another day before preparing for one.

"Hey, Sexy Lexy." Tom had a dry expression on his face.

"What do you want, soda jerk-off?"

"Not bad. Madame Cil requests your presence in her office."

"Shit. Not again."

"I'll keep your jobs warm for ya." Dante smirked his way off the barstool.

"That's all you're good for, my friend, keepin' them warm for *me*..."

Cil sighed when he walked in. "What can I say? Your magic has worked."

He took a seat in front of her huge oak desk. Staring up at the monitors behind her he spotted Dante in the corner with the mucho-grande checkbook they had eyed earlier.

"Here's the contract. Look it over."

He shuffled through to the part that really concerned him. "Shit, this is fucked. I thought you didn't want me tied to a bed anymore?"

"Only if it's not stipulated in the contract."

He rifled through some more pages. "So, no intercourse, just some dominatrix play. And she's going to pay for me to keep the belt on?"

"Seems so. There'll be the obligatory oral on your part, you did see that?"

Alex sighed. "Yes. How much?"

"Four."

"That's it? How the hell is that worth it?"

"You know the price is lower for these kind of things...that's all I've got for you. I know you need the cash."

He closed the contract. "I don't think so. Might have a sweeter deal."

"What was Paolo telling you?"

"Nothing. I've been keeping my eyes open. The auction'll pan out."

"You're getting too expensive."

He looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"The women down here aren't willing to pay what you're accustomed to. You have to remember this is Morrah. It's a new venue, we have to test the waters. I can't back you up for that kind of money here. If they don't get all that they want out of an encounter that expensive..."

"They'll talk."

Cil nodded. "And my other customers will listen."

"Well," he said, grabbing the paper. "I guess four is better than nothing. You got a pen?"

She watched him sign. "Thank you, Alex."

"Oh, no. Thank you." He walked quickly out of the office.

"I didn't understand the request." Sam looked over the huge desk at Cil two hours later.

"I know you had told me..." Cil faltered.

Sam had kept busy reading and spending time in the garden. She even did what could be considered scouting for art pieces with Sid chaperoning her into cities close to Morrah. Sid's company was very welcome. Thoughts of Alex had been there, but they weren't filled with tension. Having been given the chance to recover from the meetings, her mind had entered forbidden territory without the need for caution. She found herself looking forward to sleep knowing that in her dreams she would have the most pleasurable of encounters. It was safe. That was how she liked it.

"I know what you told me. I realized I hadn't really explained the whole idea to you. The way it works."

"Well, it's pretty simple. You pay an op to have sex with you."

"It's not just about sex. You don't hop in bed together, going at it like animals." Cil raised an eyebrow. "Unless that's what you want."

Sam looked down at the floor, getting that uncomfortable feeling again. Just being in this office a few rooms away from where she had first seen Alex was enough.

"My point is, I never asked you what your ideal encounter would be."

Sam looked up at her. "You want me to tell you?"

"It would help give me an idea of what you're looking for."

She shook her head. "I can't find it here."

"There aren't many other places where you could."

Sam smirked. "I want everything. That's the problem. I want a man. I want a man to love me, to seduce me the way those women were in those movies I have hidden away. But I don't just want it for one night. I want it for always. This isn't the place for that. There isn't one anymore."

"You don't think you're the only woman who came to a place like this thinking that, do you? It's just that once they understand, they're willing to compromise. It helps them survive."

"I'm tired of surviving. And I've never been good at compromise. Why make it worse by tasting

something that can never be a part of my life?"

"Because it's wonderful. Because a taste can satisfy that need instead of leaving you empty inside?"

"Nice psychobabble. And you might even be making sense, but it's not for me."

"Is it Alex? He can be yours if you want him."

Sam nodded. "For a price."

"He would do whatever you asked of him," Cil said.

"Are you really that desperate to make a sale?"

"You wouldn't have to pay."

Sam stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll pay. It will be my gift to you."

"Doesn't really make it any different."

"No, but it might make you feel better about it." The intercom interrupted the conversation. "Yes, Ri?"

"It's finished."

Cil stared at the black box. "I'll be right there. Sam, why don't you wait in the den? I'll be a while. Think I can trust you not to go molesting any ops in there?"

"As long as there isn't one readily available."

Cil let Sam walk ahead of her into the den. In about a minute Ri made her way down the grotto. Cil took her place as the elevator rose upward. Ri gave Sam a careless glance and headed into the office.

Clutching the base of her hair, she looked around. The steps were familiar as she made her way around. The grotto revealed as a cleverly disguised elevator; the beautiful paintings and portraits; the fireplace and the large painting of her mother and Cil. She was startled by the sounds of pleading. They were muffled, male. She walked halfway down the hall. She heard the voice of a woman. Ri? Had an op made his way up from the bar? The woman was dictating orders, mocking the male. Sam peered over in the corner. Ri's profile was illuminated by a soft blue light. She was seated at Cil's desk watching the monitors. Before Sam could come into the room the monitor was shut and a disc ejected. Placing it in a case on the desk Ri spun around to face Sam. Her movements were very fluid in contrast to her sharp features.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you, just catching up on a little business."

Sam shrugged, as her gaze returned to the paintings. Ri stared at her from the perfectly polished glass walls. After a moment, Sam made her way back down the hall. She had not dared to sit on the couch the first time she was in the den. The image of Alex remained vivid in her mind. Her hands went to the arm where his head had rested. A blush rose in her cheeks. Hating these emotions one moment and reveling in them the next was becoming too commonplace. She looked around. A thought entered her mind and ridiculous as she felt, Sam rested her cheek upon the arm of the couch. She took a deep breath hoping to retrieve some scent of Alex. There was none.

The click of Ri's heels coming down the hall brought her up quickly. The steps stopped at the end of the hall as Ri had shut the bathroom door. Sam leapt up and made her way down the hall. She didn't know if she'd have adequate time. It was still on the desk. Sam picked it up. No identification. Her eyes grew wide as she spotted a disc case in front of the shelves. Grabbing it, she placed it on the desk in relatively the same position. The hall trip was quick. She was back on the couch and out of breath

when she heard the door open. Politely, she called out.

"Ri?" She hid the case between the cushions. "I'd like to go back to my room. Do I have to wait for Cil?"

Ri looked bothered. "I'll have Sid meet you. Push the cross after you get in."

Sam pulled the disc from the cushion and held it to her side as she walked to the grotto. The gates opened and she stepped inside, feeling cramped. She pressed the cross on the statue and felt the quick jolt as the elevator traveled upward. Her heart was racing. She felt like a spy. When the doors opened, Sid smiled at her. She held the disc behind her back.

"Early night?"

She nodded. "Actually, I was wondering..."

He closed the elevator doors. "What?"

"I'm in the mood for a movie."

"I think we have a set somewhere."

"Any chance of having a disc player?"

"Cil has a couple of classics you might like."

Sid led her into the conference room. She sat at the table as he opened a cabinet revealing a monitor. He unlocked another cabinet and pulled out a few discs laying them on the table.

"I'll bring you something to eat."

Sam shook her head. "That's okay. Not very hungry."

"Press this if you need me. I'll be in the lobby."

Sam watched as he closed the door. She made sure the sound of his heels echoing against the marble faded before locking the door. Her hands were sweaty as she palmed the disc. Thankful the request had not come as too much of a surprise she made her way to the set. Most definitely Cil had informed him about her penchant for films.

She inhaled deeply and popped the disc into the player. The remote felt slippery in her hands. A seat was pulled in front of the monitor and she pressed play. The camera angle was pointed down. The bedroom was washed in various shades of yellow. The date and time were displayed at the lower right-hand side. Almost a year ago. A knock brought her eyes back to the image. A woman appeared from the left. She fixed her hair and smoothed out the hoop skirt that was part of her costume. It was out of another time. The corseted waist. The business at hand was an encounter. She was ready to hit the stop button when the door opened and Sam recognized Alex. He was dressed in Victorian garb complimenting the fashion of his client. His hair was combed back and he carried an air of modesty. He greeted the woman, grabbed her gloved hand, and bent down to kiss her fingers.

"You sent for me, milady?"

"Yes, Charles."

She walked over to the bed and sat properly. He stood in front of her, his head bowed. Sam noticed the length of his hair, curled and resting against his back. The costume: tights, ornate high-heeled shoes, baggy pants reaching below his knees, long overcoat. The look on Alex was androgynous. Sam was mesmerized as the mistress undressed her servant.

Alex undressed himself in Cil's bathroom. His after-encounter ritual was almost complete. He was

detached. His mind was trying to find his way back to his body. He had been out of it as soon as the client strapped him to the bed. Cil mumbled something through the door. Standing in his underwear he turned on the shower, testing the temperature with his fingers. It had to be hot. It was the only way to cleanse himself after one of these. The image of the client standing over him in typical dominatrix attire caused his mind to wander for an instant. One moment too many. The jolt of the streaming hot water exploded against his skin.

Sam stared intently. It was like watching a horrifying accident. As awful as it was she couldn't help but be fascinated. Alex had been fondled and groped too many times to keep track of. Sam fast-forwarded through most of the kissing and roaming of hands, but the other parts bothered her. It gave her a nauseating feeling. The disc contained countless encounters involving Alex in each scene. He was a teenage boy circa the 1960s seduced by his teacher; a police officer making an arrest; a doctor performing a medical exam. They were all about power not intimacy.

She did make it through one scene. It was a simple one. Alex rushed in wearing a military uniform returning to his wife after his tour of duty. They embraced passionately, undressing each other. Sam watched the way he kissed the woman's neck, burying his face in her hair. His lips traveled down the slope of it. Hands grasped her chin as he made his way to her chest. That was the one encounter where she imagined she was with him. The way he loved that woman's body, paying it the attention it deserved from being away for so long. It was slow, patient. They would be together from now on. They made their way under the sheets. His body moved above hers. His face disappeared under the sheets. The woman moaned loudly. He returned to her mouth. He reached over to the nightstand retrieving a small package. His hands disappeared under the sheets. After a minute his hand extended to the edge of the bed, discarding the wrapper on the floor. His interest was in the clock on the nightstand. The woman's eyes were closed as she writhed beneath him, her hands gripping his back. Sam watched him nodded his head counting to himself.

He's figuring out how much time he has left.

The climax came. There were heavy breathing and sighs from both parties. Then it was over. The woman lay motionless. Alex got up. Sam turned away. Her face felt warm. She looked down at the floor. After a few minutes the door closed. Sam looked up and saw the woman still lying there. A few fast-forwards brought her up to a few hours ago. Here was the pleading that had alarmed her earlier. Alex was handcuffed to the bedposts naked except for his belt. The woman, dressed in black leather, stood at the edge of the bed, whip in hand. Sam turned the set off.

Alex exited the shower, his skin red from the scrubbing and the heat. He touched the side of his chest and grimaced. A few thin lashes were his remnants of the evening.

"I'm fine."

Alex always responded the same way. He covered himself in a long robe and opened the door. Cil looked as she always did after these: troubled, even heartbroken.

"Thanks for letting me use it."

"I know you can't wait until you get back to your place."

Alex nodded as he dripped on the marble floor. They talked as Alex dried; Cil on one side of the door, Alex on the other. Part of the ritual. She would walk him down the hall and escort him from the elevator to the gallery entrance. For now they made uncomfortable small talk. No one else in Cil's brood received this treatment. There were times when he hated the mothering. The breaks from Cil's auctions, working on his own, purged him of that. Then there were times when he looked forward to it. More often than not, it was the only thing that got him through one of these evenings. The thought

that someone cared in some weird way.

"Is any of this money going to something important?"

"Probably not."

"Ri said it went smoothly."

The idea of that woman watching made his skin crawl. "I'm sure it was saved for posterity."

As Alex dressed, Cil went to the intercom in the hall. "Ri? We're on our way up in a few. Could you tell my company I'll be back in my office shortly?"

"Sam went up about an hour ago."

Cil looked over her shoulder at Alex. "Fine."

Alex stared at Cil from the bathroom mirror. "She changed her mind yet?"

"It's difficult for her."

He nodded, pretending to understand.

Sam sat in her chair, dazed. It had made her feel ashamed, the thoughts she had of Alex. How awful it must be for him. She was sure he despised every minute of it no matter how good he acted. Opening the door she peered into the hall. Sid was just down the way. What to do with the disc? It made sense to leave it somewhere that Cil would come across it. Sam tried not to let her steps echo against the marble floor as she tread toward Cil's office. She grasped the knob and her heart sank. Locked.

"Can I help you?"

Sam spun around. Sid looked at her with a hint of playfulness. She smiled halfheartedly.

"What's this? One of the films? You can leave 'em in there. We don't have to worry about gettin' caught with 'em. That's the last thing we think about in here."

"Actually, there wasn't a cover on this one. Thought it might be something important." She offered it to him.

He turned it over in his hands. Sam pleaded with her eyes. *Go along with this stupid excuse, please.*

Sid nodded. "I'll take care of it."

He nudged Sam away from the office door, unlocked it, and went in. He was back almost as soon as he entered. Sid placed his finger over his lip.

"You do realize you're the only person I would do this for."

"Thank you."

The lobby phone rang. He waved a finger at her.

"Gotta wait for me."

She followed him to the lobby. When he went to the desk, Sam headed to the elevator doors, rocking back and forth on her heels as she examined a Degas. Meanwhile, Alex and Cil made their way up the elevator. He was dressed in his jeans and T-shirt. His hair was damp and his work clothes were on a hanger, draped in back of him.

"You need a ride?"

Alex shook his head. "I'm only a few blocks away."

"I could get Sid to take you."

"I'm fine."

The elevator chimed at their destination. Sam turned to it, startled by the sound of sliding doors. She didn't even feel Sid grasp her arm.

"Sid!" Cil's yell echoed down the hall.

"I'm sorry. I just got off the phone with Ri."

Their bickering seemed far away to Sam. She looked at Alex. He stared back, a few feet behind Cil calmly waiting.

"Sam. Sam!" Cil shouted to get her attention. "I can't have this. Do you understand?"

Sid said, "Cil, it's my fault."

Cil put her hand in front of her face, refusing to hear anymore.

"Are you done for the evening, Alex?"

Sam was shocked to realize the question had come from her. Alex was equally taken aback.

"Well, yes, I am."

Sid held her arm even tighter.

"How have you been?"

"Good. Cil told me you decided to stay on a while longer. I was glad to hear it." He watched her watch him.

"Well, I've had a long night. I should have headed to my room hours ago. Good seeing you. Night Cil."

She walked confidently past both of them, trying not to show the excitement she felt. She turned to face them in the open elevator.

"Ready when you are, Sid."

Sid joined her in the elevator. Sam looked down at the floor. Only when the doors slid to meet each other did she look up to smile one last time at Alex.

Chapter 17

~ Decision ~

Sam was brought out of her dream by a soft tapping. Not wanting to leave Alex she buried her head in the pillow. Cil's voice floated through her head as her heavy eyes opened. She pulled the sheets off of her and sighed up at the ceiling.

"Yes?"

"I need to talk to you...right now."

There was anger in the voice. Sam looked around. Suddenly, she was afraid she would be asked to leave because of her unplanned meeting with Alex. She went to the door and unlocked it. Cil made her way in and sat on the bed. Sam waited for her to say something. Instead, she pulled a disc case from behind her back and placed it on the crumpled sheets. Sam's eyes grew wide.

"I'm not going to play games. Sid told me you watched this last night. He played along with the charade so you wouldn't get upset, but he had to tell me. This is a severe breach in protocol. And then with what happened in the lobby. Why didn't you ask me if you wanted to see this?" Cil shook her head. "If Ri had found out it would have cost me everything. She's chomping at the bit to do me in. Do you understand? You were in a room with a male, unprotected. If something had happened..." She placed a hand on her forehead. "It's my fault. I've given you too much freedom. I broke the first rule of not letting outsiders into the operation. It has to end. I'm sorry."

Sam head shot up. "No. I don't want to go. Please, Cil."

"Sid broke down and told me about the meeting in the garden last night. Do you see how many lives are being risked by this? Sid's well-being, mine, yours...Alex. I know why Sid did it and I can forgive that mistake. He would have never done it if he didn't have faith in Alex's behavior and yours. He has a hard time depriving you of anything. When you've cut yourself off from your feelings for a long time, being reconnected can make you do surprising things."

"I've taken advantage of him."

"But he was a willing participant. And I told him to look after you." Cil looked at her. "So, right here and now I need a decision. If you wish to stay on, I'll make arrangements at our hotel. I can't risk you being by yourself in the gallery. But if you stay, it is because you wish to have an encounter. Have you decided?"

Sam wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. "Yes."

Chapter 18

~ Encounter ~

The doorbell rang and Sam jumped. She was attempting to put on an earring. It was on the floor. She placed it back inside her purse on the bathroom counter. She held her mother's locket fastened around her neck, saying a short prayer to her.

Alex waited on the other side. Cil was no doubt staring at him from the monitor. He turned to the camera and gave a cheesy smile. Alex rocked back and forth on his heels. He was glad to finally have one night where he would not be trapped in the belt, even if he would have to have sex with a female. Cil had given him the whole itinerary as she prepared him for the encounter. She was very edgy.

"Cil, there something wrong with you?"

She sighed as she unlocked the belt around Alex's waist. "How many times have I had to do this with you? Get you ready for this?"

"More times than I wish."

"It seems like the first time for me tonight."

"What do you mean?"

Cil bit her lips. "I won't be escorting you out, last minute business."

Alex made a face. "Ri?"

"I'm sorry. I want you to promise me something. Be good to her tonight."

Alex buttoned his shirt and fastened his pants. "I'm always good to them."

"No, I mean...God, what do I mean? She's not like the others. This is her first time and I want it to be special. I want you to make her feel like she's the most beautiful woman that has ever walked this earth. I want her to know, without a doubt, that you want her."

"You want me to be the best fucking actor in the history of encounters?"

"Yes. Because if you're not, she'll know. And it won't mean anything."

"I'll try."

He prepared his most devastating smile for when the door opened.

Sam leaned on the opposite side, breathing deep. She grabbed the knob and peeked through the eyehole. Alex's beautiful eyes stared back at her. They were green tonight. At least in the hallway light. She wondered if he would take her as soon as he came in. The contract had been an unusual one. Her plan had been in fact no plan at all. It was one of spontaneity. Cil had never had this request before. Usually, the women had a specific fantasy they wanted followed to the last letter. The tables were turned tonight. Alex was in charge of how the encounter unfolded. In the back of her mind she hoped for something as close to a date as possible, though she had never used that word to Cil. She thought about those movies where a couple awkwardly goes out on their first date. She wanted reality. The contract was very clear. Now she was regretting the idea. Her hand on the knob turned. They stared at each other for a second. Alex spoke first.

"Evening."

"Hi."

"I've been looking forward to this. Can I come in?"

"Of course," she croaked.

He walked in, surveying the interior. It was familiar, comfortable. Though the room was not in Vegas or Vancouver, it was still his. Cil made a point of designing this room like the others Alex used for encounters. Familiarity was important to ease ops into their duties. The layout, size, and decorative touches were identical to the Green Room at Vinto's other sites. Peeking into the doors on either side of him he caught glimpses of the bathroom and bedroom. Visions of previous encounters automatically entered his brain. They were dismissed just as fast.

He was on shaky ground. He had made arrangements for dinner to be brought in, but that was the extent of it. He was going to have to read her very carefully. He had never been a part of an encounter like this. He stared around the room as if seeing it for the first time. Sid made his music available for the evening and he made a mental note to check on that later.

He was wearing a suit made of deep green silk. A high collar framed his long, thin neck. The suit seemed to elongate his body even more than she remembered. His back was to her. His hair had been styled perfectly. The hairs on the back of his neck tapered into a v-shape. She looked down and noticed highly polished shoes.

Alex turned and eyed her. "Are you ready?"

She looked dazed. "For what?"

"To eat? I'll check on dinner." He headed for the phone.

They sat at the small dining table. Sam felt the heat on her cheeks as she tried to breathing normally.

"How do you like it?"

"It's different." Sam pushed the pieces of the dead animal around her plate. "I've never had...what is it called?"

He chuckled. "Pork."

"Pork. Never had it before."

"Figured you might not have. Thought I'd have them prepare you a meal of firsts...since you'll be having a lot of that tonight. Sam?"

"Yes?"

"Is there a reason why you haven't looked up in the last 10 minutes?"

She felt the fork in her right hand tap against the plate. Raising her head, she met Alex's gaze. He had a small smile on his face. It was one of knowing and also awkwardness. She felt as if he had this unexplainable power she was defenseless against. His eyes drilled into her. The stare never faltered. It made her feel naked. She tried to return the smile.

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"Don't be sorry. You're nervous. After all, it is our first date."

Sam eyed him sharply. The revelation that he had read her mind did not register across Alex's face. She shook her head, trying to regain her balance.

"You don't have to pretend all the time."

Alex's smile evaporated. "I want to please you."

"Just sitting across from me is enough. I don't need the whole routine. I want to share a meal. We don't have to make conversation. You probably tired of doing that." Images of the encounters flashed through her mind.

"What if I want to?"

Shrugging her shoulders, she took a deep breath. "Talk away then."

"I'd like an equal amount of attention as you're giving that plate, though."

"Mm...okay." She put down her utensils. "What would you like to talk about?"

"Well, how about we start with the basics. I didn't get a chance to find out too much from our meetings. Besides, Cil is very adamant about not disclosing too much information."

"Is she usually like that?"

"No." Alex placed a forkful of risotto in his mouth and chewed. "Only with me. But then, I'm used to that." He wiped his chin. "One thing I don't get is why I never heard about you before. I mean, she said you were the daughter of one of her old friends, but the first time I heard of any of this was five days ago. I didn't even know you existed. No pictures. No stories. Cil is usually pretty open about stuff like that. How did they know each other? Your mom and Cil?"

Sam told the rehearsed lie. "Well, from what my mother told me, they went to Handell together for two years. In the same art courses, I think. They sort of kept in touch. I'd only met Cil a few times when I was young. A year ago I heard from her when my mother passed away. That's when she filled me in on her other 'career'."

"Do you mind me asking? What did she died of?"

"Pneumonia. That was what finally took everything out of her. She'd been sick for about a year. Just couldn't take anymore," she said.

"That must have been a lot for you. Did you have any help with her care?"

"My best friend, Cat. And a really close friend of my mother's. It wasn't a big circle, but it was enough."

"Cat...is that your partner?" he asked.

"No, just a friend. What about you?"

"Oh, no one right now. Haven't had anything serious for a while."

"You don't have to sweet coat it. My feelings won't get hurt," she said.

"No, honestly. I mean, you know, there's the occasional encounter, but nothing substantial."

"Cil tells me you're one of the more popular ops in the gallery. Must keep you busy."

"When I want it to," he said.

"Did you know you'd end up..."

"Selling myself?" Alex shoveled the last piece of pork in his mouth. "I think I realized at about six. After my father died."

"Father?"

"I know, weird. One of the few people on the planet that can say their father didn't come out of a test tube."

"I had no idea. I mean, I never thought..." Sam trailed off. "TC?"

"That's right, True Conception."

"Amazing. It's really rare, isn't it?" she asked.

"Supposedly. I remember reading that statistically there are only a few thousand women in the entire U.S. that are able to conceive."

"Carriers. I had a friend in school who's one. In fifth grade they found out she was viable. It was this huge occasion. They had ceremonies celebrating the fact that she would be able to add to the population. Once, I said how important she must feel, knowing she was able to create life. And she got this distant look on her face. She said, 'Yeah, but what about what I want to do?' Everything from that moment on was planned out. She's expected to conceive every few years. She doesn't have to worry about financial expenses. The government takes care of everything. But I keep remembering that look on her face."

"Where is she now?"

"I heard she was in California. It's really difficult to keep in touch when the government's involved in a person's life like that."

"Let's not get started on politics. I'd like to keep this conversation pleasant."

Sam dug into her dessert. "No wonder this stuff is impossible to find. A person could easily get addicted to this."

"You know, the best place to find it is in New York."

"I had this once when I was about eight when we went to Long Island for vacation."

"This is a mandatory item in Cil's fridge. Never will dwell in a domicile that does not contain cheesecake." Alex poured Sam a second glass of wine. "I'm guessing you don't like this vintage. It took you a whole meal to get through one glass."

"I don't handle alcohol all that well. I want to make sure I keep a level head tonight."

"Luckily, I don't have to worry about the effects." He poured his fourth.

She watched as he rose, glass in hand. The chair slid across the marble floor. She could hear his jacket fall into place, the folds in the fabric disappearing. He walked over to a cabinet on the other side of the room. Opening it revealed a music system. He hit a few buttons and guitar strings echoed through the room. Then Alex sat on the small couch. He watched the fire and sipped his wine. Sam still sat at the dinner table. Her feet seemed glued to the floor. He turned a bit, one leg bent and resting on the couch, the other long leg stretched out. The light of the fire against him took Sam back to the night she had first seen him sleeping on Cil's couch.

He looked at her. "Would you care to join me?"

Sam felt her feet loosen and her knees unlock. Grabbing her glass, she made her way over, aware of his eyes on her. She wondered if he made all of his clients feel this vulnerable. She wondered if she would ask him that. She wondered how he felt at this moment. He was too good at this. She was going to be inches away from him on this couch. She'd better sip slowly. She sat down and crossed her legs.

He stared at her bare legs and noticed a small scar on her knee. He wondered how she got it. He wondered if he would ask her that. Her discomfort was refreshing. Most of his clients were passe about the beforehand activity. He felt this was as important as the actual act. It was like a play: a

beginning, middle, and end. Not just a climax. Emerging from his thoughts, he saw her staring into the fire.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to stare. I saw the scar." He pointed to her knee.

"Oh. Dog bit me. One of those little terrier breeds. I hate those dogs."

"Looks like it didn't want to let go."

"He attached himself to me for five minutes." Sam ran her finger over the scar. "My mother was afraid he had ripped my knee to shreds when she took me to the hospital. They even found one of his teeth in there."

Alex drank some more of his wine. He realized he was letting his guard down. She didn't seem to notice his breach of etiquette.

"What were you doing while his jaw was biting down?"

"Well, I screamed loud enough to get the entire neighborhood to come. I was on the floor. I kept thinking that if I hit him, he'd bite down harder and the next thing I would see was the bottom part of my leg being dragged down the street by this piece of shit dog."

Sam shrugged and sipped her wine. Both glasses were lying empty next to the couch. As much as she enjoyed the conversation, she was finding it hard to keep her eyes open.

"Shouldn't have had that second glass, I guess."

"Well, I know an activity that might wake you up."

Sam's eyes widened. "Um, you know, as much as I'd like to I don't think I'm up to it."

"This is the perfect time for it."

He reached for her hands. Sam watched in slow motion. *He's going to touch me.* That ran through her mind over and over. This would be the first time their bodies met. His hands wrapped around hers. They were warm. And soft. He helped her up off the couch. His touch awakened her whole body. Her pulse quickened.

"Is this spot okay to dance?"

"Oh, I've never..."

"Don't worry, nothing much to this kind of dancing. I don't know any complicated steps. The only thing to remember is to relax."

Alex placed an arm around her waist. She was stiff. He pulled her closer so there was nothing between them. The top of her head reached his neck. Her warm cheek barely touched his chest. Bending his head down, he rested his own cheek on the side of her hair.

Eyes wide, Sam stared at the fire. This was the closest she had been to a man other than Ajit and she was scared out of her senses. Thoughts ran together, blurring logic. She felt the pounding of her heart at the base of her neck. He moved back and forth, guiding her body with his. Her pulse slowed down. Thoughts were again comprehensible. Her nose took in his scent for the first time. It was clean, crisp. She could smell the shampoo he used. Underneath that fragrance was a faint musky odor. *He sweats. He's human.* One of her arms hung limply on her side, swaying to the rhythm of their bodies. As it moved, it brushed against his pants. Ever so often, her fingers touched the thigh under the fabric. She closed her eyes and concentrated on that action. Giving in to the feeling, she softened and rested her cheek on his chest.

He felt her give in. It didn't take long. He knew it wouldn't. He was never wrong when it came to these things. Cil said it was one of his talents. Knowing what women wanted was his job and he had become an expert at it.

Caressing her back, he inhaled the perfume. That same lilac. He remembered the night he and Michael spent in a field in the southeastern part of France. The smell of the wildflowers and hedges had anesthetized them. That was his favorite memory of that trip. Pulling her closer, he took her arm and placed it around his waist. He wanted the smell to linger on him after she was gone. So he could close his eyes and remember. This might be kind of enjoyable. He wondered if she smelled like that everywhere. His nose brushed her shoulder and made its way up her neck. He felt her shiver and heard her gasp. *She does.*

"I love the scent you're wearing. What's it called?"

His hot breath sent tingles down Sam's back. "I think it's called 'Syringa'."

"I remember smelling it in Cil's den opening night." Alex smiled. "You were in the room while I was sleeping, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"What were you doing in there?"

"Looking at the paintings."

"Cil let you look around?" The expression on his face made him look like he was 12.

"Cil let me use the bathroom. When I came out I snooped around." Sam stared at the button on his shirt. "I know you must get this so often. But you were just so...I'd never seen anything that beautiful, just lying there."

"I've never been called beautiful before. At least by anyone besides my mother."

"I can't believe that. When I watched you sleep, there was one thing I wanted to do that night, that I never got a chance to. Would you mind?"

"Not at all."

She looked at him, her eyes sparkling. Her hand came up and the palm laid on his cheek. It moved down to his chin, trembling. One finger ran down his nose, then across his forehead. The same hand repeated the gestures on the opposite side of his face with the back of her hand. Her fingers brushed across the lips of his slightly opened mouth. Finally, the tips of her fingers stroked his neck and throat. His Adam's apple moved under her fingers. She circled it with the tip of one finger. Quickly, she moved out of his grip and sat on the couch.

"Yep. Perfect."

Alex watched her play with the hem of her dress. He knelt and placed one hand on each knee. With ease, he pulled her to the edge of the couch. Placing his arms around her back, he pulled her closer, their chests touching. He could feel the heat of her legs and breasts soak into his clothes. Her hair fell forward and brushed against his face.

She realized at that moment what ecstasy felt like. This man, kneeling in front of her. This beautiful man who would do anything she wanted. She only had to ask.

"Alex."

She whispered it, closing her eyes. She felt completely powerless in his arms. She began weeping.

"Sh. Sam. It's alright. Let me take care of you."

He pressed his lips against the soft flesh between her neck and shoulders. He let her fall back on the couch, following her down. Her hands were in his hair. Alex felt the vibration in her throat where his lips rested. He pushed himself up to look at her.

"I can't do this. It's not real. None of this is real."

She tried to pull herself up. Alex didn't move. He saw the image of Michael that morning in the hotel, saying over and over, 'But it's not real...not for you.' He moved to the other side of the couch, watching her adjust herself.

"I'm sorry." She looked around, confused. "This isn't me."

The cocky smile returned. "You know, it's not necessary for you to play hard to get."

"That's the problem. It really doesn't matter what I look like, whether or not I laugh at your jokes or make a pig of myself. Ever since this night began we knew it would end up like this. Whether or not I was interesting. You're still ready to sleep with me."

She stood there, hurt, hoping he would declare his love for her. But it was another part of the fantasy. He got up and walked over to her.

"I'm sorry." He ran his hands through his hair. "I had no idea you were so confused."

"It wasn't really confusion. Just an idea."

"You're absolutely right. I knew what I was doing coming here tonight. I was on a mission; I always am. To satisfy and pleasure. Anyway, you wanted me to." He gently stroked her cheek. "But if you're not ready to enjoy the act, then it's not the right time."

She brushed her hair away from her face. "It's scary, you know. I've never...the unknown. What if I really like it? Am I going to become this sex fiend with an uncontrollable fetish? What if I like it too much? I don't think that would be out of the realm of possibility with you."

"Well, you might be better off having your first encounter with someone who's not as devastatingly attractive." He laughed at his stupid joke. "Do you want to call it a night?"

"No."

"Well, then, what do you want to do?"

Sam grinned at the floor. "I want to dance. I want to dance with you until I'm so sleepy I can't stand up. And then, I want you to put me to bed."

"You want me to take you to bed?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'd like that."

"I think I can accommodate you."

They had danced for a half-hour when Alex felt her become heavy against him. She wrapped both arms around his waist and leaned into him. The side of her face found a comfortable place on his chest. Alex's chin was on top of her head. His arms clenched together on her back for fear she might fall. He listened as her breathing became more labored. She fell asleep standing up. He unlocked his hands and she slid down his body. He thrust his left arm under hers, holding her back. Her arms released from his waist. He gave her a small push backward. As she moved away from him, he bent down, placed his arm around the back of her thighs and picked her up. For a moment, he thought he would end up on the floor. Locking his knees he made sure he had control and carried her into the

bedroom. He placed her on top of the sheet, easing his arms out from under her.

Looking around the room, Alex checked for some clues about this mysterious woman. There wasn't much. She had probably been through the drill to not bring anything that would give away too much. It was standard protocol. He surveyed the rest of the rooms. Cil would give him hell if she was monitoring his actions. A quick trip to the bathroom would be suspicious, but a slight deduction in pay would be worth the risk. His curiosity won out. He went into the bathroom and relieved himself. His eyes darted around the room. After flushing, he went to wash his hands. His right hand brushed against a small purse as he finished washing up. It fell to the ground. Alex bent down and rummaged through it briefly. A pair of earrings, lipstick, other miscellaneous makeup: nothing of importance. Disappointed, Alex placed the purse back on the counter and walked into the bedroom.

There was a peaceful look on her face. He stood watching her sleep. He recalled what she had said earlier. Beautiful, she called him beautiful. He sat down on the bed. Removing her shoes, he placed them on the floor. One hand rested on her foot. Rejected. Cil wouldn't believe it. He didn't believe it. Maybe it was for the best. He took his hand off her leg. Time to go.

Chapter 19

~ Mournings ~

The clock in his room flashed 2:00 AM. He got out in record time to spend the least amount of time with Ri as possible. It was hard to sleep. Sam. How her fingers had moved across his face. He grabbed two pills, placed them in his mouth, and chewed. Dozing off, the smell of lilac clung to him. He forgot to shower after the encounter. When he walked into Cil's office at 8:00 AM she had a weird mixture of sadness and pride on her face.

"Well, how was it? Ri told me you didn't finish until 1:00."

"You didn't look at the tape?"

She stared down. "No. I didn't tape it. It's very important that Sam be protected."

Alex leaned his elbows on her desk. "You deviated from procedure? What the hell? What's so special about her?"

"I can't tell you that."

He sighed and leaned back in the chair. "You've never done that before. Now you've really piqued my interest."

"In time, you'll understand. She is special, though. And I don't want her future to be in jeopardy because of what happened last night."

"Well, you don't have to worry. Nothing happened."

Cil scrutinized him. "What do you mean?"

Alex waved his arms in the air. "No encounter. She decided she didn't want to. I'm still trying to figure it out."

"Now you've piqued *my* interest. Not losing your touch, are you? "

"Yeah, yeah. Just don't let it get around, okay?"

"What made her change her mind?"

"She kept saying it wasn't real. She wanted to be intimate, but..."

Cil shrugged. "She wants love."

"What I don't get is why go through all this knowing that's never going to happen. Maybe you can hook her up with Sid or something. He seems pretty into her."

"Don't even joke like that. You think so?"

"The way he looks at her, absolutely."

Cil looked intrigued. "You been checking them out?"

Alex looked around innocently. "No, noticed it the first night."

"Tell me more about last night."

Alex filled her in. Cil sat quietly, taking in Alex's expression. Then she handed him a thick bundle of cash in an unmarked envelope.

"You know, you sound disappointed."

"Disappointed? I earned 10 grand for five hours work. But if this was her money I don't think I'd take it."

"But you'll gladly take it from me. Thanks for being honest with me."

"Thanks for paying me. Besides, what's the point of lying? You're going to hear the story from her, too."

"I'm not going to ask her."

He tapped the envelope against his palm. "I'm going to head back to Vancouver tonight."

"Is that going to be enough for a while?"

"I think so."

"I take it this is goodbye?"

"Well, you're going to be busy and I don't want to bother you. Last night and all."

"You treated her the way she wanted to be treated?"

"I think I did. I hope so." He walked around the desk to hug Cil. "I love you."

"Me too."

It was 8:00 PM. Sam didn't feel like attending any club festivities. She wanted to go out. Cil gave her the address of a secluded restaurant. They didn't speak about the night before, which greatly relieved Sam. When she put the previous evening into focus, there had been unsettling information. The one that bothered her most was that Alex was Cil's birth child and she had not been told. He had been kept a secret for 22 years.

She sat for an hour, eating and staring at the corner. Last night should have brought answers. But in the end, the hopelessness of her situation was the only thing that was clear. What she wanted would simply not be possible. She would have to compromise and pervert things. They would never be pure. It was time to decide if she wanted an imposter or nothing at all.

"Can I get you anything?" The familiar voice drifted into her thoughts. "I brought you a drink." Alex filled the seat across from her. "Cil visited this place when she was setting up the club. I figured you could only be in so many places in Morrah, plus I spotted Sid's car."

Sam watched Alex sip his wine. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to make sure you were alright...before I go."

"No more jobs in Morrah?"

"Nope...no more jobs for a while."

Sam smiled. "Do you always check up on your clients?"

"No, never."

"Well, I'm fine."

"You didn't look fine when I walked in. Look, I'm sorry if last night...I mean, I wanted you to know...shit, I don't know. It's just that Cil was expecting a lot out of this for some reason. I understand what you were hoping for. I'm sorry I couldn't give that to you." His gaze faltered. "You know, if you really want that, there's someone out there for you. You have to decide how badly you want it."

"What do you mean?"

"The life you want, it's possible. To get it, you have to make sacrifices. Look at Cil. You have to give up a lot of things to do what you want to do. You have to go back in time. Do without a lot of conveniences, make a new life for yourself. Do you want to do that? That's the decision you have to make for yourself. You have time to do that."

Sam picked up the glass of wine he brought to the table. She silently toasted Alex and drank half of it in one shot.

"Is that the only reason you came to see me?"

"No. I wanted to thank you. For a nice time."

She laughed. "Well, I'm glad our not having sex constituted a good time for you. So, where are you heading?"

"Back to Vancouver. Maybe do a little hiking. Get away. Disappear."

"I'll miss you." Embarrassed, Sam covered her face.

"I'm glad," Alex said, coloring. "So, can I drive you back to the gallery before I go?"

"I'd like that. Thank you."

Chapter 20

~ Surprise ~

"Isn't there an easier way to get back to Vancouver?"

"Unfortunately, no. It's really hard."

Alex sighed, looking up at the dark sky through the windshield. His face turned stony.

"What is?"

He to the figure next to him and softened. "Getting used to becoming invisible in the States. It's a lot freer in Canada. A lot like Europe." He shrugged. "Not as militant and scared of ops."

They pulled up to the front of the gallery. Alex looked behind and saw Sid head inside the gallery as rain began to fall heavily.

"Thanks, Alex."

"My pleasure. You take care of yourself."

"You too." Sam paused. "Am I gonna see you again?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On how much money you have."

Alex began to laugh. It was a nice sound. He regained his composure.

"It depends mainly on timing...and how much you want to see me."

She bent down to pick up her purse. "Can I give you something? I know it's silly, but I'd feel better if I gave you something to remember me by. Even if you don't keep it."

"I'd like that."

She pulled a gold chain with a heart-shaped pendant out of her purse. It dangled in the air between the two of them. Alex placed his hand beneath it and she let it fall into his palm. Her fingers moved across his for a moment. He never received anything but money from his clients. Money was replaceable. Memories on the other hand...

"It was my mother's," she said.

"Are you sure? I mean, this is...if you want to give me something it doesn't have to be something so... close."

"But that's why I want you to have it."

"I'll keep this. Trust me. This means a lot."

Sam turned to the car door. Her hand was on the handle. She had to leave and not look back. Or else she wouldn't be able to go. She looked toward the gallery entrance.

"Wait, Sam. Can I give you something? Samantha? It is Samantha, isn't it?"

He brought his hand up and stroked her cheek. She looked down. Staring at her for a long time he approached her tentatively. His right cheek brushed her hair. He brought his other hand to her face. Slowly, he raised her head. Her eyes closed.

"You don't have to," she whispered.

"I want you to have this."

He spoke into her ear as he had the night before. He kissed her cheek, breathing in that light lilac fragrance. His lips remained on her skin. They searched for hers. Moving over her cheek, to her chin, and then her bottom lip. He hesitated. Heat radiated through his skin. He closed his eyes. His lips barely touching hers. They moved away and then returned. He covered her mouth with his. He kissed each lip separately, then both. Her lips opened. He moved more quickly. Covering her lips with incessant kisses. Then deeper, longer. He moved into her, pushing her against the car door. Thought left him.

Sam was in a state of bliss. She didn't know if she should respond. Afraid if she did, he would stop. His lips felt wonderful. Both of his hands gently wrapped around her back. They held her tightly, pulling her close to him. She felt as if she were breathing his entire essence into her. He was so warm. The heat of his mouth rushed through hers. His hair dangled against her face. A thumb pressed firmly into the small of her back. The toe of his left boot scraped rhythmically against her ankle. A belt buckle pushed into the soft flesh of her stomach. How long his body was. His nose rubbed against hers. She was afraid if she opened her eyes she'd wake from this dream. A dream that woke every cell, but allowed her to sleep.

Alex lost track of himself. His head moved from side to side. His tongue teased her lips. He heard her soft moan. He felt her rise up under him. She grabbed his face with her hands. Both of their eyes opened at the same time. He forced her back down with his kisses. His tongue was inside her mouth, his lips consuming her. He moved on top of her. She moved her lips against his. Her hands moved to his back. Her response drove him on. She stroked his hair. Then her tongue explored his mouth. That sent him over the edge. He was aroused in every possible sense. Sam felt him against her leg. That's when she awoke.

He wanted to be inside of her. He wanted to feel himself in her. He already felt a part of her. He moaned quietly and lay between her legs for a minute, his eyes closed. Sam froze. He opened his eyes and got up with the realization that his pants were wet. She sat up breathing hard.

"I'm sorry." He took the steering wheel in his hands.

He turned to look at her, but she was gone. Out of the car she ran into the gallery. She turned back to him. And she was smiling.

Chapter 21

~ Escape ~

Alex didn't know how long he sat in the car before turning the ignition. The windshield was fogged. It had intensified after Sam left. After I came. He remembered pulling off to the side of the road in the pitch black and exiting the vehicle. Standing there for a half-hour he allowed the rain to pour over him as he undressed and put on a clean pair of pants. He didn't remember most of the three-hour drive through Mexico. He slept in the back seat before resuming in the early morning. He needed to get as far away as possible. Away from Sam. He regretted not bringing Dante to keep him company. I was someone else. He repeated that phrase, thinking it would justify what had happened.

The next day was spent crossing nameless cities and, finally, the border into the States. He abandoned one vehicle to steal another. The remainder of the night was filled passing through some of Texas. Alex was exhausted. Record time found him in Vancouver in less than a week. If a person were to ask him how he had done it, he wouldn't have been able to answer. His memory had faded. Which is how he liked it.

He was able to acquire a room at Hagley Estate. Joanne Peterson, a long time friend of Cil's, greeted him on her doorstep at 2:00 AM. He was escorted to a room that would allow him to hibernate for a week. It was quiet, and empty, and safe. He would talk casually to other ops staying at the estate. It was normal routine. Dante made it back a week after Alex.

"It was tripping the last night at Morrah. Missed out on some swell money-makin'."

"Stuff I had to take care of up here."

"How'd you make out?"

"Didn't do too bad. Could've made more."

Dante told Alex outside of room 14 that he was leaving for Europe. Getting away from the scene for good. Alex wished him the best of luck. His week at Hagley Estate turned into a month. Cil got in touch with him after receiving a worried call from Joanne.

"What are you doing with yourself?"

"Just relaxing...figuring out what to do next."

"Figure it out soon. Joanne tells me you only leave your room for meals. If you need me, you know how to contact me."

"Cil...how's Sam?"

"I talked to her last week. She's alright."

"Is she back home?"

"Yes."

"Alright. I'll talk to you soon."

He hung up. His actions became more confused as the days passed. Memories took over; memories of everyone and everything. He awoke from dreams that involved bizarre images of Sam and Michael. Rest became impossible. The month at Hagley had the opposite effect he had hoped for: strength, emotion. His plan was to isolate himself. A trip was the remedy.

After a short goodbye to Joanne he set off for Williams Lake. It was his place to get away from the

insanity of the world. His mother and father had taken him there when he was four. It was the only place where he could breathe without having to find the meaning behind his existence.

It took two nights to reach his destination. The small town, according to history, had been a thriving vacation spot during the 21st century. After the French-Canadian dissention against the British homeland the ability to vacation for the natives had been limited. Canada became a dangerous country. A hundred years earlier a peace agreement was met and things began to rebuild. Since money was the most important factor for Canadians ops were welcomed. Alex would have never been able to walk the streets of a town in the U.S. without being questioned and possibly arrested. But here he was, walking down the gravel road, passing by the few residents of the sleepy town. He greeted them as he held the key to the cabin in one hand, his bag full of supplies in the other. The lane turned to dirt and the scent changed. The one memory that came back as he trekked downhill was of his mother and father each holding one of his tiny hands and swinging him back and forth. His father pointed out the different plants and trees as his mother described them. Alex had never known such freedom. They had gone to a remote beach for the day. The vast sight of the water touching the sky was astonishing.

He had hidden behind walls for most of his four years. Rooms with no windows surrounded him. Art had been his parents' only way of giving him a glimpse into what the world was like. His father sat at the dinner table and signed. His mother taught him how to understand sign when he was three. He would listen attentively, eyes wide as he described some of the things he had seen. Any venture into the outside world was of huge importance. They were usually at night, but it was the smells that he loved, even if they were gasoline emissions. Those scents could only come from the outside. They could travel everywhere. He could not. Father talked with such excitement that Alex would only be able to comprehend bits and pieces. Frustration would show across his young face and his father would tell him to ask his mother the rest of the story. Cil would be attacked by the small burst of energy when she came home. Mother would pull out the almanac and point out the different places. He would drift to sleep imagining what it would be like to climb a mountain or travel down a pulsating river.

All of these memories ran through him as he made his way toward the three-room cabin next to the beautiful lake. He let the memories in. He wanted them to fill his mind so nothing else would enter. This place belonged to he and his family. No one could taint it. He spent nights sleeping by the lake. Swam more than the fish on many days. Climbed through the hills and valleys that surrounded the lake. It was a peaceful time for him. And it lasted for about six months.

Chapter 22

~ Remains ~

As the funds began to run out the other thoughts returned. He would have to go back. This time he would save enough to buy a place like this. Then reality hit. He would have to work for years non-stop to make enough money to buy a shack. Something like this would never be possible and he wouldn't ask Cil for it. She didn't know he still came to this place. He wondered if she even remembered that week they'd spent at Williams Lake.

The night before he went back to Vancouver, he bought a pint of scotch and pulled out his stash of Ambutol. He had named this his 'Lakeside Revue'. Every time he left this place he reviewed his life, his plans, and his choices. All of the reasons to end it were on one side and all the reasons to continue on the other. The list on the left was long. It was always this way. But there had always been one outstanding reason on the other side that would cause him to put away the drugs and pour the scotch out on the ground. That reason was his mother. The chance he still might make her proud of him. The way she tried to do the best for him and allow him to make his own decisions. Giving him the right to be as independent as he could in this world.

He laughed as he stared at the pills scattered on one side of the table and the bottle on the other. No wonder he stayed away for so long after Michael. He reminded himself of the slump he was in after they had split up. His punishment had been to torture himself with drink, drugs, and endless encounters. So why this time? The fact that he had become a traitor to himself and his beliefs? That he had deceived an innocent woman? That he had the nerve to be attracted to this woman? That nothing was ever going to be the same? It clicked. He had to decide if this was willing to go after her.

The pills and drink were thrown out the door. Eight hours later he was back up the road. The key was returned, the trip was made, and two days later he was in Vancouver deciding how he would make his way to Vegas.

Chapter 23

~ Confrontation ~

He slumped in the chair in Cil's office, purposely annoying Ri.

"Is it really so important to see her?" she asked.

"I would like to see her some time tonight."

"It'd be a lot easier if you suited up and headed down to the club."

"I'm not working. I'm here to see my mother. She's going to be the one to throw me out. No one else."

Ri smirked. "Well then, I guess I'll keep you company until Mommy shows up."

She displayed the small stun gun that was fashionably attached to her belt. She sat across from him. He cocked his head and fixed his jacket.

"What is it about me that makes you hate me so much? Besides the obvious?"

"Oh, Alex." She puffed out a short sigh. "I wouldn't know where to begin. You're pompous, for one. That impish behavior that most find appealing, is another. I can't see any change in you since you were 10. The way you cling to your mother, a woman too naïve for her own good. You seem like you could care less about all this, yet you come crawling back with your tail between your legs for your fix."

"And what's your excuse? Why do you come back? How dare I, a male, accept the reality and wish to use it the same way women do. That's what you think, don't you?"

"Don't attempt to analyze me, Alex. It's too much of a struggle for you."

"That wouldn't be possible for a stupid op like myself."

"No, it wouldn't. If only you could be silenced like your father was."

His features darkened. "You know what I think? I'm a constant reminder of something you can't have."

"Please."

"You must have heard the rumors. It's so obvious. I mean, why would a person spend so much time around things she hates. The money's good, I'll give you that, but after a while, don't you have to stop lying to yourself and admit the real reason?"

"You're right. I don't know why I didn't realize it myself. What do you think your mother would say if she saw us going at it right here when she came in?"

"Please, I just ate." He recoiled back in his chair.

"You know what makes you so beneath me? It's not society. It's your basic inferiority. Like all men. Your ability to be used. Like this." Ri stood over him. "This won't hurt too much."

Alex looked up. His pulse raced as he saw her reach for the stun gun. He prayed that Cil would show up. The gun was at the back of his neck and a jolt ran through his body. Everything faded away and then come back. Like still shots. He felt disconnected. He could hear her, faintly.

"Let's see how much this disgusts you." She unzipped his pants and began sucking on him. "For someone who was completely disgusted by the idea, you certainly stiffened up fast enough. Of course,

being the pig that you are, you'd fuck anything that moves." He could feel her spit hit his face. "Now, you can truly say you've been fucked over by me. So pathetic. I don't know why she puts up with you." She sat back down, pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, and wiped her mouth. "You don't know how hard it was to fight the urge to bite down...hard. That repulsive thing. But without it, you wouldn't bring in any money for Vinto. And you are one of our best products. I would never find any pleasure in fucking you. The satisfaction I get is from controlling you. That's my job. And I'm good at it. Don't forget that. Ever."

The rest of Alex's facilities crept back to him. He looked down at himself and pulled his pants back on.

"That's good. Get ready for Mommy. Wouldn't want to let her see you in that condition."

He took several long breaths. "You're going to regret this."

"Spare me. I've had enough of your games for one night. I'll get Sid to watch you."

Alex shot out of the chair and pushed her into the wall. He grabbed the gun and gave her a small hit. The force stunned Ri and he was able to turn her around. His hand locked around her as he slammed her chest against the paneled wall.

"You can scream if you want. In fact, I think I'd enjoy it," he panted.

"Why would I bother? No one can hear me." Her tone was eerily calm. "I'm going to make sure you never work again. When they catch you, you'll be permanently unserviceable."

Alex began to panic, but he couldn't turn back now. He grabbed her by the hair and savored the shriek of pain.

"But I can still service you." He pushed his groin into her backside. "And it wouldn't take much for me to get it up. And there are always other objects I could use. How do you think this gun might feel? Before we get to know each other better, I'm going to need your assistance. You don't mind, do you?" He brought his knee up hard between her legs. "I didn't think so. You're going to access Cil's files and get me everything your system has on Sam."

"Sam...who?"

"Cil's friend. She was in Morrah for the opening."

"The one you screwed? Got some extortion plot in the works? That's what this is about? Better be enough cash to last you the rest of your life."

"Spare me the bullshit and get on the fucking computer."

He banged her head against the wall. He walked her over to the desk, pushed her into the seat, and held her by the neck. The gun was pushed into her side.

"Comp, activate, client info, Samantha Dumas."

"I want a copy of it."

As soon as Ri pressed the print key Alex stunned her. She moved violently back and forth then went limp. He carried her into the bathroom and laid her in the tub. It would have been so easy to fill it with enough water to drown her. Alex found some utility tape in a cabinet, which he used to cover her mouth and tie her hands and feet together. He locked the door from the inside and shut it.

Looking up, fear rushed into him. A serene beach scene hid the cameras. His eyes traveled around the hall as he tried to determine how many views the lenses had of the incident. He reentered the office opening drawers. There was a petty cash box and Alex took \$1,000. He pulled out the printed page

and glanced over it. No biographical info, just likes, dislikes, financial status, encounter documentation. There was one line that got his attention. *Contact Ajit. Needs updates on conditions in Padua. Locate through Mira.*

Padua, Italy. Mira, one of Cil's ex-curators. Quick pictures of postcards Mira had sent to Cil during the last 12 years shot through his mind. One of the reasons he hated Ri so much was because she had replaced that beautiful lady. She would sit him on her lap and tell him stories, play games, and watch movies with him when Cil worked overtime. When she left he was heartbroken. She was out of the business. But she and mother had been in touch. She was in some kind of furniture business.

He stuffed the paper into his pants pocket and sat fidgeting in the office. It was impossible to process what had occurred in the last 10 minutes. What the hell was he going to do? He wouldn't work for Cil or any other club. The news would travel quickly underground. *Untouchable*. That's what he would be. This was not how he had planned on getting the information. If he explained the situation to his mother she would tell him about Sam. It wouldn't have been necessary to do those things to Ri. But it felt great. Twelve years of rage spilled out in a few moments and he had felt an alien power. He had been in charge of Ri for that brief period of time. It balanced those embarrassing, humiliating acts of submission and obedience he had to show her for his mother's sake.

I'm free. As those words entered his mind the door to the elevator opened and his mother sauntered in. "Hi, Cil."

He ran his fingers through his bangs, wiping off traces of Ri. Inside he was screaming for help; wanting desperately to tell his mother what Ri had done. But he remained quiet, obedience still ingrained in him. She sat on the armrest of his chair and kissed his cheek.

"Sid told me you're not working tonight. I'm shocked."

She wiped the lipstick off his face with her hand. It was the same spot where spit had been from the woman who had molested him. A shiver ran through him.

"I can't stay. I wanted to check in with you before I head off."

"Can you tell me where you've been for six months?"

"Up in Vancouver."

"You know, life becomes unbearable when all I get from you is a cryptic e-mail every two months." She looked around. "Where did Ri go? Sid said she was up here with you."

"She left a few minutes ago."

"She left you by yourself?"

His hands went up in mock defensive. "It's not my job to tell the woman her responsibilities. Think she went looking for you. Listen, Cil, I've got to go."

"Right now? I thought maybe we could have some dinner."

"I've been waiting 30 minutes."

"Are you in trouble, Alex? You don't seem...right."

"I've been thinking about a lot lately. I'm getting ready to make some changes. I can't tell you what they are yet. But you'll know when I do."

"Whatever you do, keep in touch? Often?"

"I'll try."

"I guess that's the best I can ask for."

He rested his head on her shoulder. "How's Sam?" He got up and kept his back to her.

"I haven't heard from her in a month. You took a liking to her, didn't you?"

"She's a good person. Don't see that often. Has she been back?"

"Not since Morrah."

He reached into his pocket and crumpled the paper. "I've got to go."

Before she could get up, he was gone.

Chapter 24

~ Knowledge ~

It was 11:00 PM. Alex stared up at the apartment terraces that lined the narrow street. The directions the transport driver gave him were deposited in a trashcan. He felt the translation of 'furniture shop' got mixed up. From what he surmised the transport wouldn't fit through the labyrinth that made up the dense cluster of buildings. Alex had written down the directions to a store that sold furniture. He lost his patience trying to decipher it. He walked around looking for someone who could help him. The aroma of espresso hit him like a fist. A few small tables lined the sidewalk. It would be nice to sit outside in the night air of a beautiful city. He had a small amount of cash left. After 10 minutes a robust woman of about 50 made her way outside.

"Espresso, per te?"

Alex nodded. The woman looked him up and down. He returned her smile and she made her way back inside. The door was open and Alex peeked in unsure his company would be accepted. Even in a place more tolerant of ops it was wise not to overstep. He thought it best to stay right where he was. Some laughter could be heard above the filtered radio music. There were a few people in the café. All these things reminded him of his time with Michael in France. The foreignness of everything. The beauty of an old culture set in its ways and not about to change. He longed to have someone to share it with. As far as he knew Michael remained in Europe.

The woman came back and placed the small cup on the table in front of him. Alex thanked her and watched as she stared out into the street, sighing. She untied her apron. The strong sip of coffee jolted Alex. He listened as she seemed to be talking to herself, eyes roaming through the exteriors of the building. She turned to him.

"Where you from?"

"I'm from the U.S."

"Eh." She sat in a chair across from him. "No good for you."

Alex took another sip. He was acutely aware of the way she eyed him. He realized as soon as he had gotten off the plane that analyzing visitors was a great Italian past time.

"This is very good." He gestured to the coffee.

The woman was down to his shoes. He opened his wallet and took out a small picture. The 15-year-old photo was worn and faded. Another part of the past.

"Do you know this woman? Her name is Mira."

"Si. Sta la." She pointed down the street. "E Americana. Coma tu."

The woman walked back inside. Excitedly, Alex left what he thought would cover the cost on the table. His steps echoed against the cobblestones. When he got close he noticed the name 'Mira's' written above a weathered door. A large glass window made up the rest of the building. Small display lights revealed various types of furniture. This had to be it. Alex rang the bell. A light went on in the second story window. A shadow peeked through the curtains.

"Hello?" He waited a few seconds. "I'm looking for Mira. My name's Alex...Cil's son."

The sound echoed long and drawn out. The shadow disappeared. Might as well prepare to be arrested. The lights went on in the shop and Alex saw a figure run to the door.

"Alex?" The light glowing through the doorframe gave her a soft quality. "My God. I don't believe it." She led him inside. "I always wondered how you'd turn out. You managed to inherit your father's good looks."

They sat in a small kitchen, eating. The lines on her face were more apparent now. The beauty was still there, though.

"What's Cil up to lately? That woman cannot stop working. She's going to pay for that."

"I'm afraid she's going to get a long vacation she's not going to want to take."

Mira looked dumbfounded. "It's not your fault, Alex. You were protecting yourself. No one else will see it that way, especially considering the quick getaway." She grabbed his hand. "Your mom has faith in you. You can stay as long as you need to."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He handed her the piece of paper. "Do you know her?"

"I knew about her. Only met her when she was a kid. I knew her mother through Cil."

"What was her mother's name?"

"Sarah."

"Do you know a person named Ajit?"

Mira smiled. "Yes. He works for me."

Alex laid on the small couch in the living room. Boxes of store items were scattered around. He stared at the ceiling at the shadows made by the lamps. Alex never slept in an unfamiliar place with the lights off. Sleep hadn't visited him for the past 72 hours. His conscience was eating at him. It pounded with every heartbeat: guilt, shame, fear. His life would never be the same because of those brief minutes in Cil's office and he wanted to take it back. He wondered if he could ever have a thought without going back to that night. Maybe this is what it was always going to be like.

Mira promised he would meet Ajit at 7:00 AM when he showed up for work. Six hours to go. Closing his eyes brought back the face of Ri, taunting him. He banged his head against the armrest. Even thinking of Sam didn't help. That only reminded him of why he was here. It was another long night for Alex. He awoke to the sound of a faint clicking noise. It was Mira turning off the lamps. Amazed that he had actually slept, Alex sat up and checked the clocks.

"Three hours of sleep."

"Good morning to you, too. You don't look like you got 10 minutes." Mira grabbed his face and turned it from side to side. "Why don't you take a shower? The shop's going to open soon. Everything you need's in the cabinet. Do you want some breakfast?"

He let out an immense yawn. "No, thanks."

Alex entered the kitchen, spotted the coffee machine, and poured himself a cup. He performed an unconscious ritual that had begun since his departure from the States. Sam's locket was around his neck. As he did so often, he held it between two fingers and ran it back and forth along the chain. When Mira entered the kitchen he jumped and spilled coffee on his shirt. After a quiet curse he turned to her.

"He's here."

Alex followed her past a small garden to the workshop. Everything illuminated by the morning sun looked old and worn; the buildings, even the vegetables and flowers. His heart beat faster with anticipation. Little whirlwinds of dust were created by their movement into the room. A few tables

were littered with tools, wood, metal, and paint. Works-in-progress and completed pieces lined one wall. Blueprints and designs hung on another. As Alex examined them the door opened and a tall figure entered. A panicked expression flashed across his face. Mira walked over to him and did something he had not seen a woman do in 20 years. She began signing.

"It's alright. This is an old friend who has come to visit."

Jit approached with a tentative posture. It surprised Alex, considering he was taller and had a much bigger build. He watched Alex through the blond strands of hair that covered much of his face. His eyes were as worn as the rest of the place. Alex extended his hand. Ajit looked at Mira.

"Jit. This is Alex. Cil's son."

Ajit grabbed Alex's hand and embraced him. Alex stood dumbfounded in the grasp of this huge being.

Mira laughed. "He knows your mother very well."

"I'm glad we finally get the chance to meet," Alex said to Jit, and signed the words.

Then they began a conversation. Mira left, allowing the two to talk in private.

I've heard a lot about you over the years.

"I wish I could say the same."

What brings you here?

"You, actually. I was hoping you could tell me about Samantha Dumas."

Is she alright? Has something happened to her?

"No. As far as I know, she's well. I haven't seen her for six months."

When did you see her?

"I met her at one of Cil's clubs in Mexico."

Ajit eyed him with a brief moment of jealousy. *You work in the clubs?*

"Yes."

You and Sam?

"We spent some time together. We didn't do anything. She scheduled an encounter with me, but she backed out. This is really odd. I've had a lot of weird feelings. I need to know more about her. When I found out about you, I was hoping..."

Ajit glanced at the floor. *Why didn't you ask Cil?*

"Cil's very careful about the information she'll give out to an op."

But you're her son.

"That only goes so far in this business."

Well, I'm not getting involved in anything that will get me on Cil's bad side. That's not a safe place to be.

Alex laughed. "Sounds like you know Cil pretty well."

I've known your mother since I was nine. She saved me. She and Sam's mom.

Ajit told how he was rescued from the streets. Alex watched him eagerly. It sounded like something his mother would do.

"I didn't know anything about Sam until six months ago. She told me Cil had been friends with her mother, but that they lost touch over the years. Is that true?"

I don't want to say anymore. I think you need to go to your mother. It's not my place.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to do that. I'm in a bit of trouble."

I'm sorry, but...

"I know this is too much information in a short period of time. You just met me. I was hoping I could find out more about Sam."

Ajit grabbed the Sam's locket dangling on Alex's chest. *Where did you get this?*

"Sam gave it to me."

She gave this to you? This was her mother's.

"She wanted me to have it. Her name was Sarah? She must have been a great woman...like her daughter."

There was sadness in Ajit's eyes. *She was.*

"Would you like to have it?"

No. If Sam gave it to you, it's yours. I have some things to remind me of her.

"That's good. I don't think I could give it away."

Does it still have Sam's picture inside?

"Picture? I didn't know."

Alex took off the necklace and inspected the small picture inside. Sam was five years of age.

I have to get to work. We can talk later. I'll tell you what I can.

"Thanks. I really appreciate it."

The morning was spent admiring the sights. Alex enjoyed being visible and anonymous; the freedom to walk and not be questioned. Coming back to Europe reminded him of how much he wished to fend for himself without relying on anyone. And here he was, relying on another woman. He shouldn't stay long. He was putting Mira in an awful position. She wouldn't tell him to go. He would have to take the initiative...soon. They talked over lunch in Mira's kitchen.

So, why do you need to know about Sam?

"I'm worried about her."

You said she was fine.

"She is. I know this makes no sense."

Be honest with me. Sam's very important to me. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her.

"Neither would I. I've never felt this way about a woman. I've never wanted to be close to a woman... know her. I need to know where I can find her."

Ajit brought out his wallet and pulled a picture from the folds. Alex stared, his eyes wide and his mouth open.

That's Sarah.

He looked up at Ajit. "That's Sarah? I have met her."

Chapter 25

~ Momentos ~

His mind began to float as he remembered where he had seen her before. It was at a club. He was sitting at the bar. It was a few months after Michael left him. He'd turned a trick for \$200 in the bathroom. Fringe clubs were always a good place to go for easy money. That had been his main activity during that depressing period. Easier than facing his feelings. The feeling of eyes on him was something he was so accustomed to that he didn't bother to glance around. Which did not mean he wasn't alert to his surroundings. One thing Cil had taught him was to never let his guard down.

He looked into his beer glass, deciding against another. Had to keep his head straight. Stay in control. He closed his eyes, leaned back and listened to the sounds around him. This form of meditation rarely worked, but it would pique the interest of whoever was watching. He could feel it.

When the bartender asked if he wanted a refill he noticed her. She gave off an aura of being above the place. A dignified, relatively normal-looking woman of about 40, leaning against the bar. The fact that there was no look of disgust was probably what surprised Alex the most. She couldn't have been in that seat long. He would have noticed her sooner. It was when their eyes met across the bar that Alex realized it had been her stare that he had felt earlier. They watched each other for a while. The first move was hers.

Ajit listened carefully.

"It was a few years ago. In Vancouver."

I don't think Sarah was ever in Vancouver.

"I'm positive. It's the same woman."

What happened?

He continued the narrative. "Can I join you?" she asked.

I motioned at the stool next to me. "You look about as out of place as I do."

"Do I? I thought I fit in quite nicely." Her hand extended itself. "My name's...Sarah."

She said her name was Sarah. It was in his relaying of the story that he remembered the look of ease on her face.

"Nice to meet you. What brings you here tonight?"

"Business." I made a point of looking her in the eye. "You?"

"I'm acquiring some pieces." Sarah laughed. "Art work."

"Ah. Thought you'd find some great artwork in this place?"

"No, I was hoping I'd find a good drink after a long day. How about your business? Did you do well?"

"Not too bad."

The embarrassed smile on Sarah's face made me realize she knew what business I was in.

"Are you done with business?"

"That depends on you."

I touched her hand with the tips of his fingers, which caused a jerk. Her glass tipped over, spilling all over the counter.

"I'm sorry. I thought that you were interested."

I watched her grab napkins and place them on the spill. "No, it's my fault." She apologized to the bartender and requested another. "I should have made my interest clear in the beginning. I'd like to spend some time with you. I realize your time is of great value. I'm willing to pay you."

"Why don't we have a seat at a table." I led the way to a booth. "What is it you'd like exactly?"

"I'd like to get to know you." The expression on her face was without the slightest hint of sexual overtones. "I was hoping you would have dinner with me. We could talk, you could tell me about yourself. That's all. As I said, I'd pay you for your time."

"Why would you want to know about me?"

"Curiosity. You could say it's a hobby of mine."

"You go in clubs and talk to ops about their lives?" I shrugged. "That sounds fine to me. What would you like to know?"

"Everything. But let's order first."

We took our time during dinner with me doing much of the talking. I was occasionally interrupted by requests for more description. This mysterious woman was so enthralled by my story that I felt no need to make things up. I would never see her again. And for some reason, I took to her right away. There was something familiar about her. No need to hold back. And besides, I had only had one other instance of talking to a woman as a human being. It was a situation I was eager to relive. It fascinated me.

"How old were you your first time with a woman?"

"Sixteen. On my birthday in fact."

"Was that the first time you had ever been intimate with someone?"

"Yeah... I'd come close with some males. I know it sounds sick, an Oedipal complex or something, but my mom's voice would always pop up. I'd hear the speech that she would give to the ops in the club about how much money women would pay for a clean male. No diseases, bad history."

"What was it like?"

"My first time? Let me think...horrible, humiliating, those words come to mind. Not that she was a dom queen or anything like that. I've had plenty of those since. She was very attractive. I'd say she was around 30. She was very specific, though. What she wanted. And I didn't have a clue as to what the hell I was doing. But that was how she wanted it, I think. Cil told me she went for young blood. She heard I was a virgin and this was my 'maiden voyage'. Cil's phrase, not mine. She was willing to pay a huge amount. I really don't remember much of it to tell you the truth. I tend to block out most of the details once they're over."

"Do you wish your life were different?"

"Of course."

"I mean, if you had a choice, being brought up in your world or say a host?"

I shook his head emphatically. "No. I'd castrate myself first. Or kill myself."

"Do you think your mother did the best she could for you?"

"As much as she could, yes."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes."

"That's good." She whispered, "I'm glad."

After dinner?

Alex looked up. "What?"

What happened after dinner?

He shook himself out of the past. "I rode back with her to her hotel. She invited me in."

And?

"We talked some more. She asked if she could watch me sleep. I've gotten stranger requests. When I woke up the next morning, we ate breakfast and I left."

Traces of Jit's skepticism remained on his face. *It could have been her, I guess. It would have been around the time she was diagnosed. Before she had to stop traveling. Sarah has been known to help ops out occasionally. Ajit motioned to himself. I have Sarah and your mother to thank for me being alive today...getting a bit of enjoyment out of life.*

"Look, I know I haven't gotten the whole story out of Sam or Cil. I don't expect honesty in a business like this, but I do cherish respect. I've gotten that from Sam. And I want to thank her. To speak my peace. And see where it leads. I have nothing else to lose at this point."

I believe you. I'll tell you where you can find her.

Alex was too startled to answer.

Chapter 26

~ Connections ~

—
Cil followed Sam up the steps to the attic. The door opened with a firm push and a musty odor permeated the air. Boxes littered the sides of the small pathway. They were passed quickly.

"I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to wrap this up proper, but I've been really busy. Truth is, I forgot all about it. Then you showed up on my doorstep and it all came back. My plan was to give you this for your birthday."

She rummaged through the corner that housed her paintings. It was draped and in back of a larger canvas. A smile appeared as she thought back to her actions nine months ago.

"I didn't frame it. Figured you'd pick out something you like."

"Can we take it downstairs and have a proper unveiling?"

Sam nodded. Cil placed the covered painting on the couch and took a deep, comical breath like she always did when she looked at Sam's work. She never understood why it was so vital that Cil accept what she did. The nerves were always for nothing, though. Cil loved everything Sam put on canvas. At this point, she could open a gallery exhibiting all the paintings she received.

"I'm ready."

Cil removed the cloth. Staring at the back of the canvas she read the date. 'Mother's Angel' was scribbled on the rough surface.

"Oh, Sam, it's stunning." Cil's eyes began to tear. "This is truly breathtaking."

"I'm glad you like it."

Cil looked at her. "Did you paint it after Morrah? It's such a perfect likeness. I assume you did it while your memory was fresh."

"No, I finished it six months after Mom died."

Cil looked startled. "You did this last year?"

"The last few nights in the hospital Mom was delusional. She kept telling me about this dream of an angel. She wanted me to paint it. She had sketched it herself. I didn't think I'd be able to do it justice."

"And you never made the connection?"

"What are you talking about?"

Cil limply pointed with an outstretched finger. "See for yourself."

Sam walked out from behind the couch. As soon as she looked at the figure, her jaw dropped. Staring back at her was the unmistakable countenance of a male she had met four times in the past year. A male she had met nine months after she completed this image on this canvas. It was an amazing resemblance. Suddenly, everything that Sam had pushed to the back of her mind came flooding forward. Sam placed her hands behind her neck, locking them together.

"I don't understand. Why would she be dreaming of Alex?"

"You said she was delusional."

"Delusional, not able to predict the future." Sam walked toward the painting. "I got the eyes right," she whispered.

"What? Oh, I know how this could have happened. She must have come across a picture of him in my things. When I would come to visit."

"But you told me you don't carry stuff like that. You couldn't risk it."

"Well, anyone can make a mistake. Lord knows, I've made my share of them."

"I guess that's it." Sam turned back to the painting. "How is he?"

"I don't know."

"Off on another adventure?"

"No." Cil stared at the floor. "He's disappeared."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Three weeks ago." Cil struggled to speak between sobs. "He hurt Ri. In Vegas."

Sam's eyes went to the painting. The angel stared back. No, Alex wouldn't do that.

"She said he attacked her. He demanded money. When she refused he threatened to rape her. He even used her own stun gun. He left her tied up in my bathroom. My bathroom. Unconscious. She could have died. And then he waited for me in the office as if nothing had happened. I found her 10 minutes later. She could have gone into a coma. She came out of the hospital yesterday."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Sam. It was him. There's no way anyone else could have been there. I just...I don't understand what he was thinking. Why he would do that to himself."

"No one's seen him?"

"Believe me, if someone had seen him he'd be dead by now. Vinto was able to keep the story under wraps. Ri's going to be paid a considerable amount to keep quiet. But underground, oh, it's horrible. I've been given a year off."

"What? But you didn't do anything."

"I was responsible for allowing him access into my office. For giving him the chance to do what he did. Sid's been fired. Might as well be called exile."

"Oh, no. I don't believe it."

"Have you heard from him?"

"Why would I?"

"He had Ri access your client file before he..." Cil began crying hysterically.

Sam felt as if the air had left her lungs. "This doesn't make sense. I can't believe he'd do these things...not in a premeditated way."

"Whatever reason, he did it. And I think it would be best for you to stay someplace else for a while. Get out of this house."

"If he was that crazy for money why didn't he hurt you? Why didn't he kill Ri? Do you really think your own son would hurt you or me?"

"I never thought he was capable of doing the things he did to Ri. He was an animal."

"Do you have any evidence?"

"Vinto took everything to make sure nothing leaked out."

"Well, you need to find out for yourself what happened."

"Everything is so...I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Well, you're staying here tonight."

Sam stayed up most of the night comforting Cil. When she finally slept out of pure exhaustion it was Sam's turn to battle insomnia. The monitor system was on, ready to alert her in case anyone entered the house. She still could not believe Alex had done this thing. All she could remember was the way he had kissed her that night in the car. Even if it was true, it didn't change anything. If Alex knocked on the door she would let him in without an ounce of fear. But his mother wouldn't. She recalled something similar happening to Ajit when he was 14. Jit had almost attacked a guard who was patrolling the Verona slum and threatened to take him in. He'd had enough. He was ready to fight back. Maybe Alex was, too.

She tried to disconnect herself from thought by lying in bed reading. Something to get her mind off events. She read about a young man who had been locked in a tower for eight years his identity concealed even from himself. He had no past and, consequently, no chance of a future.

He was so beautiful... never seen anyone so beautiful... but he never opened his eyes.

Sam put down the book. It was what her mother had said the night she died. Her angel. What else did she say? A vision of Alex came into her mind. Of when she herself had seen him for the first time on the couch.

"Sleeping. She wouldn't be able to see his eyes. Wonder what that means."

The word *shame* popped into her head. Her mother's voice filled her ears. *Asked why I had left him for so long...I told him I couldn't stay...told him you needed me...different world...he said he loved me.* She began crying. *Defending men...that's what he came to do...that's why he's called...*

"Alex."

Tossing aside the sheets she grabbed her laptop. Typing in 'name origins' gave her etymology links. Again she typed. Alexander—Defender of men.

"Defender of men. You knew who you were dreaming about Mom. But what does it mean?"

Feeling some vindication, Sam put her things away and attempted once more to fall asleep.

"I truly love you for this." Aggie sat at the kitchen table drinking the sanctioned cup of caffeine Sam put in front of her. "That's it. All of my favors have been cashed in for this."

Sam sat down, turning the disc over in her hands. "I knew if anyone could get her hands on it, you could."

"I still don't understand."

"And I can't tell you anymore than I already have."

Aggie nodded. "Cil is a good woman. If it will help her, I've done my part."

Sam kissed her cheek and wrapped her arms around Aggie. "I hope so."

Chapter 27

~ Reunion ~

The wind blew fiercely. Sam turned up the volume of the monitor to block out the noise. It was almost 11:00. The news channel was discussing the festivities taking place for Independence Day. She really could not care less. She found it hard to think of anything besides Alex.

Aggie got a copy of the video the night Alex had attacked Ri. Cil and Sam watched it together. What had transpired with Alex was dehumanizing. It clearly showed justification for his actions. At least in their eyes. What the rest of their politically correct society would see was questionable. Sam put it in a safety deposit box at the bank. They agreed time was needed before proceeding to the next step.

Sam had to come up with a way to help Alex. *He came for me.* All of that responsibility caved in on her. All she was able to do was go to work and come home worrying if he was alright. The sound of heavy drops hitting the house overpowered the howling of the wind. No fireworks this year. Cat was going to get drenched. Should've listened to the weather report. She turned up the volume.

Alex stared through the opening between the drapes into Sam's living room. It began to pour. He'd come all this way. Now what? This need to see her gnawed at him for months. Now was the time to act. But there was fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of being caught. Being pushed away. Being alone with these feelings. Was it worth the risk?

It was surprising what the sight of her did to him. She was sprawled out on the couch. Her hair was hanging loose over her shoulders. Her eyes were halfway open, not very interested in what she was watching. Her legs were propped on the table in front of the couch. She was beautiful. That fact was reaffirmed. He had wondered if he'd made her out to be more beautiful over the past year. If anything, he had not done her justice. His excitement overwhelmed him. His pulse quickened and he began breathing faster. The strange feeling that had started in the car returned at the sight of her. What would Cil say to this? She certainly wouldn't approve of stalking. Would she even want them to see each other? He wanted answers to so many questions and Sam would be able to give them to him. But there would be time for that later. *After what?* The fear returned. It would be better to head back to Europe. Continue his anonymity. Forget everything. Try to survive. Or go back to Williams Lake.

The rain soaked him. His hair was in front of his eyes, ruining his view. He brought his hand up to push it back. He placed the hood of his jacket over his head. The thorn bushes whipped his back as the wind picked up. *It's time.*

He crept around the back of the house. This was it. She could call the authorities if she wanted. He wouldn't run. If she didn't want to see him, nothing else was going to make a difference anyway. The back porch was brightly lit. He checked his surroundings. The houses next to Sam's were dark. The tall, lean figure dressed in black made it's way under the dry protection of the porch. All the lights were on in the house. His hand went up to knock. He inhaled deeply. Unsure, frightened, excited. Waves of emotion rushed over him, one bigger than the other. He closed his eyes. He could feel her locket lying lightly on his chest. Would she even remember him? What he did to her that night in the car...it could have scared her. She might not want to see him. She hadn't been back. That might have been enough.

Sam headed into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. She straightened up. Was that a tapping? She closed the refrigerator. Someone was knocking. The shadow of a figure could be seen through the curtains. She walked over to the door.

Alex stopped knocking when he saw her approach the door. His tongue moved around the inside of his mouth in a nervous fit. He began chewing the inside flesh of his mouth.

Her mouth was slightly open as she looked through the opening of the curtain. A hood disguised the person. A burglar? He turned to view the street revealing his face. The locks began to turn. Alex turned back to the door and began to smile. Sam stepped back a few paces. He closed the door behind him, leaning against it. He pulled his hood down, revealing his entire face, wet and pale. Sam began laughing and crying at the same time. Then she embraced him.

"I'll get you wet."

"I don't care. I can't believe you're here."

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner." He placed his arms around her waist.

"Cil and I have been so worried. We saw the tapes. I'm so sorry...what that woman did to you. You shouldn't be here. It's too dangerous. Do you need me to get a message to Cil?"

It didn't matter. He was there. He could ask for anything. She would give it to him.

"I wanted to see you."

She looked up. His face moved toward her. She backed away. He looked scared.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Come here."

She brought her hand down and extended it toward him. He grabbed her hand. She pulled him close and they kissed. It was shy as if they were guessing each other's moves. Then she broke off.

"I don't understand, but I'm not going to question it. You should get cleaned up."

He followed her up the stairs, through a bedroom, and into the bathroom. She opened a closet and grabbed some towels. She turned to hand them to him. Her face was flushed.

"I'll fix you something to eat."

He placed the towels on the counter. "No. Will you help me dry off?"

"You can't handle that yourself?"

"Don't leave. Help me."

He grabbed a towel and handed it to her. Sam opened it and threw it over his head. She massaged his head dry. It was so strange. This man in her house wanted to be with her. Wanted her to kiss him, hold him, touch him. This beautiful man. She pulled the towel off, revealing his hair damp and wild. He ran his fingers through it, pushing it back.

"I need to tell you so much, Sam."

"This is just...I can't believe this."

"I know, I can't either."

"You need to dry off before you get sick. You can put your clothes in the dryer back here." She searched around. "I have an old pair of jeans and T-shirt that might fit. I'll put them on the bed for you. And I'll fix you something to eat."

"Alright. I won't be long."

"Don't be."

She smiled and walked out. Alex came out 10 minutes later. His skin regained its pink tone. His body was covered with a towel around his midriff. The room was decorated in various shades of blue:

carpet, bed, furniture. Noticing a neatly folded pile of clothes on the bed, Alex dressed. They were a perfect fit. He remembered how big Ajit was. Must have outgrown these a long time ago. He heard the sound of music drift upstairs. He recognized the track, hearing it often at Cil's openings.

Alex walked over to the dresser. Opening a perfume bottle he drank in the smell of lilac that he loved so much. When he put the bottle back down he saw her staring up at him out of a frame. The same woman who had crossed his path in Vancouver two years ago: Sarah. The picture had been taken around the same time as the one Ajit carried with him. A question had been answered, but more remained. Slowly, he lay down.

"Alex?" she called from below.

He made a dash out the bedroom, flying over two steps at a time. He ran into the kitchen out of breath. She looked up, smiling.

"Thought they'd fit."

"How'd you know my size?" He sat down across from her at the table. "I guess you didn't expect to see me tonight."

She laughed. "No."

"Ajit convinced me to find you last week. That's how long it took me to get here."

"Ajit? You met him?"

"In Padua. He's staying with an old friend of your mother's, working in a furniture store. I stayed with her. Told me all about you."

It was difficult for Sam to keep track of all of the information. "You know this is really dangerous...you being in this house, in this neighborhood, in this country."

"I don't care." He told her about his trip.

"What was that saying...you were a man on a mission?"

He bit into the last of his sandwich. "I don't know how long I can stay."

"Will you stay the night?"

It was quiet. "I wanted to know if you've made a decision?"

"About what I want? I think you're helping me make it right now."

They sat on the couch talking into the morning. Alex made his way across the couch over the course of the hours. He held her most of the night, wrapping his entire body around her.

Chapter 28

~ Morning ~

They fell asleep holding each other. Sam awoke at 9:00 to the sound of a message alert on the monitor. Alex was still sleeping. She shook him. His eyes opened for a second, then closed.

"I've got a call. You've got to get out of view."

Suddenly, he was wide awake. "Who is it?"

"Can't tell. It's a UIT. Could be anybody."

"Is it safe in the kitchen?"

"Yeah. " Sam fixed her appearance and took the call. "Hi, Cil."

"Hello. Just wanted to check in." There was a moment of silence. "Did you sleep in those clothes?"

"I was up late watching movies. Fell asleep downstairs. Did you need anything?"

"I was wondering if a mutual friend contacted you lately. Never mind. If you had I'm sure you would called."

"Oh, no, have you heard anything?"

"I was told he was spotted in Europe. I hope it's true. That was all, really. Will you be home later?"

"No, I'm going out with Cat."

"Well, have a good time. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Sam waited for the monitor to go black then programmed the screen to take messages. "All clear."

Alex emerged from the kitchen. "It's good to know she's worried about me."

"She's your mother. She's supposed to worry. She's been through so much this past month."

"Thanks to me." He sat down on the couch. "I can't keep you hostage in your own house. You have plans?"

"I was planning on spending the weekend at home by myself."

"Are you expecting visitors? Cat?"

"She's headed down to the shore for the week."

"Well, what should we do? I'm starved. Why don't we talk over breakfast."

Alex took a huge gulp of juice and leaned back in his chair. All windows in the huge house had been securely shut, blocking out the world outside. The kitchen was usually lit with sunlight, but had a pale gray appearance this morning.

"I guess I finally came clean with myself."

"Clean?"

"Admitted the truth." He pulled the locket out from under his shirt. "I want what I'm not suppose to have."

Sam took pleasure in that instinctive action Alex had performed. He was gripping it tightly, running it back and forth along the chain. Alex's appetite also surprised her. It was one of many things running through her mind.

"It's funny, you know. I always thought what I did was acting, playing these twisted characters for women. I felt like a porn star sometimes. I was doing it to survive. But it was also a test. To make sure I was impenetrable. No woman could get to me, because they were all perverse and miserable, evil. I was never attracted to them. No woman was like my mother. No other woman had a soul like Cil. Cared about me as a person. It took my lover to show me myself and I didn't want to believe it even then. His name was Michael. After that night with Anna, I was sure he was wrong. I didn't feel anything for her and she helped me. I thought if there was one other woman in the world like my mother she probably would be the closest I could find. And there wasn't anything there. I wandered around after that. Not really caring about anything. What was the point, you know? I think I became empty. Have you ever felt like that...empty?"

"Yeah."

"I saw you that night for the first time and I didn't feel anything. You just seemed different, that's all. I didn't run around screaming I was converted." Alex flailed his hands above his head. "It made me curious. Once you get so used to the usual types something new intrigues you. Then I found out how important you seemed to Cil. And then we spent that night together talking. And I liked it. I didn't have to act. It freaked me out." His eyes softened. "And what happened in the car made me think about everything. It was like I was someone else, doing something that was right. I've never been that intimate with anyone before. I know how ridiculous that sounds, but it's how I feel. My guard was down. And I don't think something like that...you should let go without making sure there isn't more there." He leaned forward, two fingers caressing the skin under her sleeve. "So, what do you think? Forget about everything else. For the next two days I want us to concentrate on you and me. See if there's a chance..."

"To be together?"

He nodded. "I want that. I really do."

"I still can't believe this."

"Neither can I. A year ago, if someone had told me I'd be risking my life to be with a woman?"

"You know, I've thought about you every day for the past year. So much sometimes that I thought I'd go crazy. Wondering where you were. Thinking of ways I could track you down. I never wanted you to leave me that day. I don't know what to feel. It's everything I've ever wanted; someone like you saying these beautiful things. It's scary."

Alex squeezed her hands tighter. "It is for me, too."

Chapter 29

~ Ecstasy ~

It was noon. Alex was amazed by some of the gadgets in the house so Sam gave him demonstrations. That led them to her room. He jumped on the bed patting the cover next to him. Sitting on her bed, they both looked around the room. Alex leaned against the headboard, watching Sam as she put away the computer. He looked over at the dresser, noting Sarah's picture. He reached out to place his hand on her back. Sam reacted subtly to the touch. A quick shiver. His hand moved down to her waist. Sam moved back to join him. She leaned against his shoulder. He pointed to the picture.

"Is that your mom?"

"Yeah."

She climbed over him. Stepping off the bed, she stretched and grabbed the picture. He sat up and took it from her. With his other hand he held hers.

"I take it she was the best mother in the world?"

Sam grinned. "Of course."

"I didn't know when I should tell you, but I met your mom once in Vancouver. When Ajit showed me the picture of her it came back to me. I met her in a bar." Alex paused, choosing his words. "She was having a drink after work. She said her name was Sarah."

"You talked to her?"

"Think it's just a coincidence? Ajit didn't remember her going to Vancouver."

"Mom didn't discuss business with Jit. She was always going on trips."

"She said she was in the art acquisitions business."

Sam smiled at him. "Yeah."

"Kinda weird, me meeting your mom before I even knew about you."

"What are the chances of that? What made you remember her?"

"She was nice to me. Can't say that about too many women."

Alex told the story as he had told Ajit.

"It's not impossible. My mother was comfortable around everyone. Can't really see her in a bar like that, though."

"She didn't look like she should've been there."

"The more I learn about my mom the more I realize I didn't know her."

"You never really know anyone."

Alex's hand traveled up her arm. A blush came to her cheeks and she closed her eyes. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat next to her.

"I guess I destroyed the mood."

"That's not possible."

"Do you want to?" Alex turned to her and kissed her neck. "I brought protection with me. Sam, I

want to make love to you."

"I'm scared."

"You don't need to be. Do you trust me?"

He pushed her down his arms wrapped around her back. Hers moved around his neck. They spoke between kisses. She stopped to read his face.

"Does it hurt?"

"It can...the first time."

"Then it might."

"But if you want me to, I'll stop. Just tell me. I won't do anything unless you want me to." Alex sat up and pulled his T-shirt up and off. "Sorry, I'm probably not all that you expected."

Sam smiled. "You're perfect."

She ran her hands down his arms. They were long, not muscular. But his skin was so soft. His stomach was flat, with the slightest indication of abdomen muscles. She stared at the symbol above his belly button. Her fingers pressed it for a brief moment. Her eyes roamed across the rest of his body. No distinctive waist. His chest and midriff the same width. Up to his chest she could feel his ribs. He breathed in deeply.

"Do you like?"

His hands clasped hers and moved them to his chest. He laughed awkwardly as if he had never been intimate with a woman before. He searched in his pockets and pulled out a condom.

"We're gonna need this."

"No. I don't want you to use it."

He stared at her. The use of protection was a part of sex, even with Michael. His mother had told him never to take that risk with his life.

"You don't have to use one with me," she whispered. "I want to feel you the way I felt you close to me when we were in the car that night. Just you."

Alex felt the condom in his right hand. "It's not right. I don't want to risk hurting you or giving you something."

"You're clean. Are you scared?"

"Yes." It escaped before he had a chance to think.

"I am, too."

"Tell me what you want. Look at me and say it."

"I want to feel you inside me." She pried the condom out of his hand and tossed it on the floor.

"Alright."

He lay on top of her. Sam felt his shoulder blades, his spine. Her tongue peaked out of her mouth running against his neck. The tips of her fingers explored his skin. Her lips covered his neck with tiny kisses. She found his mouth and covered it with hers. The taste of him was incredible. His lips were soft. Her kisses deepened and she licked his lips. He entered her mouth with his tongue and she laughed.

"It tickled."

Without missing a beat he was back at her mouth. His kisses left Sam gasping, but she had never enjoyed anything more. His hands found their way to her chest. His breath became extremely hot as his mouth went to her neck. He looked at her, out of breath.

"My turn."

He rolled onto his back as Sam crawled on top of him. Her knees straddled his chest. Her hair fanned down in front of her face. She took both hands and pulled the mane so it rested on her back. Alex moved his hands under her shirt. Moving up he cupped the underside of her breasts. Sam grabbed the bottom of her shirt and tugged it over her head. Her nipples plumped to his touch. Sam's head leaned back and she closed her eyes. Her body was soft and round. Alex was in an endless wave of fascination. His hand moved from her breasts to her neck to her stomach. They found their way to her back and pulled her down to him. Her hair blanketed them. Her nipples were hard against his chest. Guiding her forward he fondled her breasts, licked them with his tongue. They exchanged positions and he was above her, massaging her breasts. She heard his groans of pleasure, which excited her even more. He came back to her mouth. His tongue invaded her mouth. His hands went between her legs. She found his belt buckle and undid it. The button, then the zipper. Her fingers traveled over his underwear and found she caressed him timidly.

"Wait."

Getting up off the bed, his pants hanging around his waist, he pulled her by her ankles. He removed her pants, then her underwear. He took a few moments to marvel at her. Then he stepped out of his pants. She sat up.

"Let me."

Eyes wide, she pulled down his underwear. No painting or sculpture had prepared her for this. She stood up and they held each other. She could feel him against her. Like in the car. Only there was no thin veil of clothing between them. They fell back on the bed, holding each other.

"I'm ready," she sighed.

He entered her slowly allowing himself the luxury of feeling himself inside her. He bit his lip and groaned through his closed mouth. He moved into her until the tip of him was against that part of her that he would soon conquer. Her whole body shuddered. He didn't want to cause her pain, but there was no way to avoid it. The way her body contracted around him sent tiny sparks through his skin. He moved out. It was time. He entered her forcefully, all the way into her. Sam cried out. Her eyes opened and she grabbed his back.

"It'll be alright."

He comforted her as he tried to deal with the new sensation of being inside a woman without protection. Waiting inside her. Trying to maintain control was incredibly difficult. He began to move inside her. An unbelievable feeling. Filling her up. Emptying her. Entering again. He began rocking back and forth, causing friction. Fire ignited inside of her. She gasped when she felt him explode inside her. The delightful sensation lasted only a few brief moments. He came, then slumped down all of his weight on top of her.

She breathed heavy against his skin. Eyes wide open, she stared at the ceiling still feeling him inside her. He wanted to stay like that, in her, a part of her. Alex felt her chest begin to move rapidly. He moved to her side to look into her face. She was crying. He didn't need to ask.

Sam turned away. It was unexplainable. Hot tears traveled across her nose, her cheeks wetting the

sheets. A glimpse of her mother's picture on the dresser brought more emotions, more tears. Her hands searched for the sheet and covered her naked body. Alex cradled her in his arms. Not speaking. No need to. Nothing would stop the tears. He smiled as he leaned his cheek on her forehead. His need, the most important one, was filled. Complete. Everything else was irrelevant. He was hers. Whether she wanted him was unimportant. His existence had found meaning. Alex had been looking at the clock on the dresser for a half-hour when Sam spoke.

"Thank you."

"I'm the one that should be thanking you. It didn't hurt that bad, did it?"

"It was wonderful."

"Yeah."

"For you, too? Was it like Michael?"

"Yes and no." Alex tasted her lips. "Maybe later, we can try some other things."

"I want to do everything." She pulled close to him.

"We've got time. All in time."

They stayed in bed the rest of the day. They kissed in between words and sentences. Held each other. Tangled themselves in the sheets.

"That was a great one."

"I think it's better than 'Rebel'."

"No question."

She leaned on his chest. "You know, you look like him a little bit."

"Sure." Alex distorted his face.

"Would you have slept with him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Me too."

"I wouldn't have a chance then if James Dean were alive today?"

"None at all. Of course, I would have slept with Ms. Monroe in a second, too."

"She was something. I wouldn't sleep with her though."

"A blatant heterosexual speaks." Alex watched as she ran one of her fingers around the middle of his chest. "I think you and Marilyn are probably the only two women that I would truly enjoy being intimate with."

"What an honor to be placed in the same company." Sam grinned. "So does that make you a homosexual who enjoys sleeping with a heterosexual on occasion?"

"Maybe a semi-bisexual with high standards," Alex laughed. "I don't think it makes me anything really. I mean, Michael was the only guy that made me truly enjoy being intimate. But he was right. There was something missing that I can't explain. But it was there between us today."

"Now, are you satisfied? After this weekend, you won't need to experience it again with me?"

"No."

Sam smiled. "Good."

She made her way to the bathroom. He heard the water begin to run in the bath. After hearing the soft splash of her body in the water he got up. A stain of blood was in the center of the sheets. He bundled them up and headed into the bathroom.

"Where do you put the laundry?"

"You can put them in there." She motioned to a cabinet on the side of the sink.

He saw her blushing as she washed herself. "What?"

"You're so nonchalant about walking around naked in front of me."

He knelt against the tub. "We did just make love. Do you think we have to be modest?"

"No, I like it."

"I like it when you look at me." He grabbed the rag and washed her back, chest, and legs.

"Where will you go?" she asked, after they were back on her bed.

"I have a place I can go. I should be alright."

"I want you to stay tonight."

"I will."

"Will you wait for me?"

A look of satisfaction covered Alex's face. "You'll come? If you do...you know..."

"Things can't be the same, I know. But if you want me, I'll do anything to be with you. And if you love me nothing else matters."

Alex swallowed hard. "I do...I love you."

She whispered, "That was a lot harder than it looked, wasn't it?"

"Do you love me?"

She held him close. "As corny as it sounds, I fell in love with you the first time I saw you. I wanted you to love me. I don't think anything can change that. Of course I love you."

Sam spent most of the night staring at Alex as he slept. His mouth would open to take small breaths. Then he would close his mouth, breathe through his nose and begin the process again. A whistle escaped in a weird, rhythmic pattern. Sam tried to match her breathing to his. Her life could be no better than at this moment. She was sure of it. As the night progressed she began to feel a slight ache in her heart, realizing she would have to part with him tomorrow. Time had passed so quickly. She held him close, her cheek pressed against his shoulder. She kissed his chest and made a silent wish.

"Sam? Did you say something?"

She edged on top of him. "I'm not going to let you go. I'm going to physically attach myself to you. Maybe I'll tie you to the bed."

She kissed the dimpled skin at the base of his throat.

"We could do that if you want." He held her hair in his hands, stroking it

He chuckled and she felt those vibrations through her lips. It wasn't long before the playfulness turned to passion. She savored the sweet and salty taste of his mouth. This time, as he entered her she was able to experience him more acutely. She closed her eyes as they whispered quietly of their need for

each other.

Chapter 30

~ Reality ~

They stayed up after they had made love the second time. He wanted to stay longer, but he couldn't risk another day. It was 3:00 AM.

"I can take you to the waterfront," Sam proposed.

"No. It's too dangerous."

"It's more dangerous for you to try to get there without my help."

"I'm not going to risk getting you mixed up in all of this," he said.

"I'm already a part of it. How will I know where to find you?" she asked.

"Don't worry." He stroked her cheek. "I'm not going to disappear for long. I'll get the information to you. Somehow."

"Send for me as soon as you get there."

"I should be settled in about a week."

"I'll be ready. I won't be away from you any longer than necessary." She watched him as he dressed.

"Not anymore."

He smiled. "If you change your mind, I'll understand."

"I won't."

Before Sam knew it, they were downstairs embracing each other in the kitchen. He held her for a long time, kissing her cheek and lips.

"Promise me you'll let me know as soon as it's safe."

"I promise." Looking at her for the last time, he took a deep breath, opened the door, and was gone.

Chapter 31

~ Adjustments ~

Once a few hundreds were placed on the counter the woman leaned toward Sam. "Just follow the main road to the forest clearing and take the trail down about a mile. It's the only cabin to the right of the path as you reach the lake. That's where you'll find Mr. Smith."

Mr. Smith...quite the moniker. She wondered how many surnames he had used instead of Brennan. Sam turned away when a bony hand grasped her wrist.

"He asked me to look out for you. He's been waiting for you. Can't recall him ever having company. He always leaves the cabin in good condition."

The woman looked embarrassed and let go. Sam's steps were quick as she walked the dirt road toward the clearing. Her backpack jostled up and down in rhythm with her steps. She reviewed the previous two weeks as she felt the soft rays of the morning sun. The plans could have gone quicker, but it was important to not arouse suspicion. It still didn't feel real. Could they finally be together? The thoughts pounded as she reached the clearing and started down the trail. Birds chirped and leaves rustled as unseen creatures scurried through the lush green. Sam took it in as she walked down the path. As she was about to turn the last corner, she heard a splash, then a scream.

"Ah! Woo!"

Sam reached the clearing to the lake. The cabin was off to the right. Just beyond it, the lake. And the cause of the commotion was in the midst of that water. She sat on a large rock, observing him. Alex was swimming in circles, submerging and then resurfacing. She had never heard him so vocal. Her feelings for him heightened as she watched him play. Alex swam to the edge of the lake and got out naked. He draped a towel around his waist and pulled his hair back. When he spotted her he smiled. Sam walked over and embraced him. She felt the wetness from his chest transfer to her shirt. His breath on her neck was soft, rhythmic from his exercise.

"You don't know how much I've missed you." He grabbed her face and kissed her.

"I know." She pushed his hair back with her fingers.

"Come on inside. It's not much, but I like it." His arm moved around her waist.

"It's very peaceful here. No one around to bother you. No one who'd really care to."

"Yeah. It was my own secret hideaway. I guess it's both of ours."

He opened the door. A room with a tiny couch and table greeted her inside. Sam noticed a blanket and pillows on the wood floor in front of the fireplace.

"Don't worry, it's not that prehistoric. It does have running water. The kitchen is through there." He pointed toward the doorway adjacent to the fireplace. "And then there's the bathroom next to it."

Alex held her hand as he walked behind her. The kitchen had enough space for three people and consisted of two gas burners, a sink, and two cabinets. The bathroom had a shower and toilet. Alex was in the bathroom doorway as Sam stood in the tiny space.

"Only one at a time in here I'm afraid."

She looked at his beautiful face. "I can do this. If I'm with you, that's all that matters."

Sam pulled him into the cramped bathroom. They were against the wall, holding each other.

"It can accommodate two after all," Alex said.

"I'm hungry. Got anything to eat?"

"I'll make you one of my specialties...pork and beans."

When she sat down, she asked, "Is it suppose to be this... gloopy?"

She examined her plate, then looked up and saw some of the orange liquid drip down Alex's chin. He grabbed a napkin and wiped his face.

"Interesting description." Alex sat back. "You're going to have to get used to this. It's a main staple around here. Unless you want me to take up hunting and gathering. The only thing I'd be able to catch is a squirrel. It's really not that bad. Try it."

She stabbed something Alex had identified as a slice of hot dog. Taking a breath, she brought the fork to her mouth. Looking at Alex's amused expression, she began to chew.

"Well?"

"Let's just say my affinity for meat products has yet to be tapped into."

She ate the rest of the meal. The first night was spent talking in front of the fireplace.

"I think once we figure out what we're going to do we should let Cil know we're okay."

Alex nodded. "Yeah. We have time, though. I've been thinking about what we'd do out here when you finally came. There are some amazing things. About a day's hike east there's a spring. And the sunset over the mountain ridge...I'll take you up there tomorrow night."

"How'd you find this place?"

"My parents and I came up here once. When I left to go to work at a club the first time I came up to Vancouver. I made a ton of money in a month. I sat down with all this cash in the middle of my room at the club figuring out what I wanted to do. And that's when I remembered Williams Lake. I made my way back here. And I've been coming back every chance I get." He stroked Sam's leg. "This is where I can be really happy and really depressed. This is where I can scream at the top of my lungs or cry for hours. It's where I can be myself and not be afraid of it."

He lifted his chin up high, adding a bit of melodrama. He looked down at his hand still rubbing her leg. His grin left as he concentrated on that action.

"This is the best place for you to see me and figure out if I'm what you want."

"I already know you're what I want."

His gaze returned to the fire. "That's why I wanted to share this place with you. I've rented it for another month. That should give us time."

It would not be too hard to get used to 'roughing it'. She watched the orange-yellow glow wash over his countenance as it had the night she first saw him asleep on the couch. Only his eyes were shining in the light, mirroring the flames. She placed her hand on top of his. Her fingers slid over his knuckles and his nails, her thumb rubbing the side of his hand. She brought it to her lips and kissed it, lying next to him on the blanket. Alex lay down next to her.

"I don't think I've ever been this scared before."

"Me either."

Sam fell asleep first that night. Alex lay awake watching her. Finally, assuring himself she would still be there when he woke, Alex welcomed sleep.

Chapter 32

~ Admissions ~

He jerked himself up and ran to the door, throwing it open. His heart pounded. He couldn't spot a trace of her anywhere. His breath began to hitch in his lungs. He steadied himself in the doorway pressing his hands against the frame. He pushed against it wanting to topple the cabin, hoping he would be buried beneath it.

"What's wrong?"

Alex spun around. Sam was in the kitchen wringing a rag tightly in her hands. She dropped it and walked over to him. His mouth was open. His breathing was heavy.

"Alex...what is it?"

His eyes filled with tears and his face turned red. He struggled to say something. Tears ran down his cheeks as he tried to gain control of his breathing. She sat next to him on the couch and rubbed his back.

"What is it?"

"I thought...I thought...you'd gone."

Alex was quiet as he sat on the porch looking out onto the lake. Sam sat next to him. It had been an hour since he had calmed down.

"I'm sorry I acted that way," he said.

"I hope you acted the way you feel. There's no reason to be sorry for that. It shows me you love me as much as I love you." She placed her hand on his back. "You don't have to be ashamed of showing your feelings to me."

"I'm not used to this. I never expected to react that way. It was..."

"Real."

He smiled. "Yeah."

"It's not like we have a lot of control over what's happening. Neither one of us has ever let our emotions take over. We've always done what's expected. It's scary and freeing all at the same time, you know? The unexpected will always do that to you. If I had listened to reason, I wouldn't be here, taking this risk with you. You wouldn't be here, either."

He leaned back. "I've never given myself to someone like this before. This trust thing..."

His hands came around her back. Her fingertips ran across his face. His hand buried itself in her hair cradling the back of her head.

"We shouldn't be doing this out here."

She stopped. "I thought we were alone."

"We are. But you never know. Since we're talking about trust and being honest, can you tell me the truth about Cil? From what I could piece together, your mom and Cil knew each other for a lot longer than I was told. I figure you were put up to lying. But for us to be safe with each other, you and I both have to be honest."

After a few deep breaths, Sam began. "Your mother was my mom's best friend. She's been like another mom to me, more so since her death. They knew each other as children, went different ways

around the time they were 16. But they always kept in touch. It's funny. Things used to make sense to me. Once I found out what Cil really does, nothing was real. All the lies that really weren't lies; things that were done for my protection. One life shattered and I'm making up another one with the broken pieces. And it'll never be the same."

Alex shook his head. "You didn't know?"

"I didn't know about any of it, not even you...until that night I saw you in Cil's office. It made it safer for everyone. I still can't believe they were able to keep it from me for so long."

"So why did she tell you at all if she had kept silent for all of those years?"

Sam sighed. "She said she saw the struggle I was going through. I tried to do what was expected. It wasn't working. It was easier when my mother was alive. I had something that meant a great deal to me. When she was gone I was in a daze. I tried to make a life that appeared to be like everyone else's. Cil always knew and she kept that a secret from me all those years. She waited until the time was right."

"We were never suppose to meet," he said.

"Seems that way, doesn't it?"

"I wasn't suppose to be at Morrah. She deliberately kept the opening a secret from me. Even then, she wasn't telling you everything."

"I don't blame her," Sam said. "She was protecting both of us. I'm sure of it."

"You've just told me you can't be sure of anything anymore."

"I can't lose my faith in someone who has done so much for me. It was done for a reason. I want to at least believe that."

Alex raised his eyebrows. "I tend to be more cynical."

"Because of what you've had to deal with."

Alex looked at her sharply. "We haven't all had the opportunity to live in a fairy tale. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I'm just angry. I wish Cil were here so I could tell her off. Shit." He got up and kicked the porch post.

"All this time. All we missed out on. A whole other life. Not that you would've wanted to be a part of the one I grew up in, but what I would've given to be a part of yours. Even if it had to be in a subversive way."

Alex turned around to face her, leaning against the rail. "I've been underground my whole life. I remember my Dad once made the comment that my life would be like living in a grave. I didn't understand it then, but it became pretty clear to me. I'm always just outside of life. Everything in your world is out of reach for me." He bit his lip. "It's not quite being invisible. If I were, I'd be able to move about and not be seen. It's like I'm the plague. I have to be eradicated. Just like every other op who feeds off other people's sickness. At least that's what those moral, above-ground citizens call it." He walked over and sat down. "What did your mom tell you about ops?"

"Not much. She would answer questions, but she never gave me an opinion, good or bad. It really wasn't until Ajit that I saw how Mom felt. She saved his life."

Alex's smile returned. "Having met your mom, I realize where you get it from."

"What?"

"Your kindness, openness. I do hope you get mad once in a while too, though, just to balance things out."

"Don't worry about that. You may get your chance to see it." She ran her fingers down his neck, tracing over a vein pulsing beneath his skin. "I'm glad I got to see more of you. We shouldn't have to censor ourselves. That wasn't the point of any of this."

"No, it wasn't." He leaned in and kissed her.

She whispered. "I totally forgot. I made breakfast."

Alex cleaned his plate with the remaining slice of bread. Sam had brought the cold breakfast out to the porch where they ate, taking in the air and the scenery as they talked.

"You're sure it was me?"

"Positive. It didn't really hit me until Cil made the comment. I still can't figure out how something so obvious completely escaped my attention."

"That's really weird." He shivered.

"The only thing I can come up with is she felt guilty about it. The secrets. Of course, it could have been some weird coincidence. She was never really that lucid toward the end."

"I would like to have seen it."

"I'll be right back."

She grabbed his cleaned plate and headed into the cabin. Alex turned toward the sound of soft splashing. He could spot some action toward the edge of the lake. A fish tail emerged and slapped against the water. When Sam returned she handed her laptop to Alex. She sat against him and opened it up. Silently, he watched her fingers as she typed.

"I keep a copy of all my work. A portfolio, I guess." She motioned to the screen.

"I can't believe you did this. It's amazing." His eyes squinted. "Well, it certainly looks like me. Minus the wings, of course."

Sam nodded, embarrassed. She decided to keep the thought of him looking like an angel the first time she saw him to herself. It was all too eerie, the connections. She watched how his eyes examined the picture.

"Can I see what else you've done?"

Sam sighed. "Sure."

After a few instructions Sam let him explore the files and view her work. "They're great. But you must hear that all the time."

"Not really. I don't show them to people."

He turned to her. "You should."

Sam pushed away the notion. "Not ready to yet."

"There must be at least 50 paintings in here. When do you think you'll be ready?"

"It's just for those close to me. What do we have planned for the rest of the day?"

"Well," Alex said, rhythmically tapping the arrow key. "We could head into town and cause an incredible scandal. Or I could take you for a hike to some of my favorite spots. I don't want you to feel like you can't go out on your own. Just want you to be safe if you do."

"After a few days I'm sure you won't want to babysit me anymore."

His hand went to the base of her neck, rubbing his thumb over her collarbone. "I don't mind looking after you."

His eyes traveled over her face. Sam watched with half-closed eyes as he took the notebook off his lap and placed it on the bench. This was too wonderful. She was afraid any sound from her would cause him to stop. His other hand went to her back, pulling her to him. His mouth opened, lips covering her neck. Her hands went to his back, holding him as his mouth went to the opposite side of her neck. His fingers were in her hair, supporting her head. This time when his mouth opened, his tongue tasted her neck, pressing over the skin.

"Hm."

The sound passed through his lips against her skin. It made her shiver. She leaned forward as she felt his teeth scraping over her neck. It made her gasp and she clutched his back. He began sucking her pale flesh, biting it softly. He enjoyed feeling her between his teeth, licking the skin with his tongue. He concentrated on that one spot. Alex opened his mouth. Her entire body trembled. He realized how much he wanted her. She had nothing on under her shirt. The thought of her skin raced through his mind. Her eyes were closed, mouth open. She looked lost in a deep sleep. He whispered in her ear.

"Let's go inside."

Sam nodded, her cheek rubbing against his earlobe. He stood in front of her. She noticed how fast he was breathing. He took her hands and helped her up. Sam led the way into the cabin. His hands rested on her waist as they walked. She heard the door shut. His hands were at her back, holding her close. It took her a minute before she realized they were back on the floor on the sheets in front of the fireplace. She felt his palm moving in small circles. His other arm draped over hers, stroking her hair. His mouth was hot.

She felt dizzy, as a lock of his hair teased her forehead. The side of his hip pressed firmly against hers. She let his tongue explore her mouth. He shifted onto his side. His hand moved with great finesse, pulling the shirt. The fingers inched it up in folds until the stomach was revealed. His hand went up and down the smooth skin, pushing the shirt up further. He felt her spine, the tips of his fingers caressing the contours of her back. She arched up off the floor, giving his hand space to maneuver. Her body tingled everywhere.

"Like that?" he whispered.

She nodded, eyes closed. His breath was against her mouth, then her neck. His knees were against her thighs, straddling her. She felt him lean down, his bottom brushed against her knees. Sam opened her eyes and he motioned for her to lift her head while he placed the pillow under her.

"Nice?"

"Yes, Alex."

She felt his fingers under her shirt. His thumbs stroked the underside of her breasts. He cupped them and squeezed. His fingers moved over her nipples letting each finger glide back and forth.

"I could tell you liked that."

He unbuttoned her shirt and parted the folds to expose her breasts. His mouth went to one, then the other, licking each nipple. He squeezed them together, rubbing the nipples with his thumbs and sucking hard with his mouth, pulling the breast into his mouth. The nipple popped out of his mouth and he greedily returned to it. A hand traveled down her stomach, into her pants. Her breath caught in her throat in submission. He traced the outline of the fabric with his fingertips before his palm reached

inside. He felt the hot flesh, the coarse hairs. He kissed her breast lightly, concentrating on the feeling of her most private area trembling in anticipation. Two fingers teased her opening, entering slightly and experiencing the wetness he had stimulated inside her. He moaned happily before going in further.

His tongue went over her nipple, slowly licking. He looked up, sensing her pleasure. He found that area of moist, hard flesh clasp it between his fingers. He felt her arch into him, saw her mouth open. He grabbed her breast, sucking hard, licking the tip of the nipple inside his mouth. She moaned loudly as his fingers increased their activity. He wondered if she was aware of his own excitement pressing against her thigh. Her eyelids fluttered open as she approached the moment. Before her nipple could escape his mouth he bit down slightly. Sam whimpered softly. Her eyes opened wide. He could feel her body spasm beneath him, her wetness released around his fingers. Her hands went to her face as she cried out. He let go of her nipple and felt her moan as her body became still. He remained fixed above her. Smiling, he realized it was the first time she had climaxed. She stared up at the ceiling, in shock.

"I didn't think you could do that without actually doing it." She put her hands over her face.

"I'm glad I could help you come...to that realization." Alex pulled her hands off her face. "We have time to work on lots of other ways for you to achieve that goal."

Sam felt him against her. All of him. Her hands went down to his groin. He broke from her. She rolled him onto his back and leaned against his side.

"You have to tell me if I do something wrong."

She worked her hand into his pants, then recoiled. "Sorry...just thought you'd be wearing a bit more under there."

Alex moaned into her kiss. Her fingers moved awkwardly. It didn't matter. The simplest touch from her was enough. Finally, she found a way that suited her, rubbing her palm against him. Then her fingers wrapped around him gently. She cupped him and began to move her hand up and down. Sam asked if she was doing it right. The answer dragged out in a deep moan. Sam sat up and peeked inside his pants. She felt herself becoming aroused at the sight of him.

"Alex?"

Sam slid her hands out from his pants and took off her shirt. He stared as she pulled her unzipped pants free from her hips, past her knees, and off of her feet. Alex pulled his shirt up and over his head. Looking at her as she took off her panties he removed his pants. He parted her legs with his hands. He knelt above her for a few seconds and then entered her. He felt how warm and wet she was, penetrating easily. He moved back and forth into her, hard and fast.

She stuttered, "Don't stop."

Alex tried to control himself. "Like this?"

He moved into her again. Sam moaned and began to spasm. He came into her, groaning loudly. Then he fell against her, exhausted and content.

Chapter 33

~ Night ~

"I never had anything I was good at." The fire Alex made by the lake warmed them as they sat under the stars.

"There isn't something you've always wanted to do besides traveling around the world?"

"Not really. The option was never there. You knew at a certain age what was expected. So, you didn't think about it. It's this unspoken rule. What about Ajit? Did he ever tell you what he wanted to do?"

Sam looked into the fire. "I never asked."

"Because you knew it, too. Even if it was on a subconscious level."

Alex laid back on one of the sheets they had dragged out of the cabin his head resting on the palm of one hand. His other hand slowly rubbed his stomach. He opened his mouth and stammered.

"My father got me a book on astronomy when I was four. Cil read it to me. I still have it somewhere. I used to study maps of the stars. The times when we would go out at night, I'd find all the constellations my mind could remember."

"I can usually find Orion. You have a favorite?"

"Leo." His finger traveled upward. "See that triangle of stars right there."

Sam squinted. Alex crawled over to her with a stealth that was incredibly arousing. The way the light played over his body fueled her erotic thoughts. She willed herself to turn away before she pounced on top of him. He sat close to her. His hand went to her chin pointing her in the right direction.

"There." He outlined the sky. "That's his tail. The brightest star in the triangle is the tip of it. It's called 'Denebola'." His eyes lit up. "His tail is right above Virgo's head."

Sam smiled. "The virgin."

"Yeah." He sat in back of her, his long legs astride her.

"Where's his head?"

He traced a curve connecting the stars. "It looks like a backward question mark. That last star is 'Regulus'. It means 'little king'. The Big Dipper is right above his head there."

She brushed her cheek against his neck. He propped himself up on his elbows. She was reminded of how fluid his movements were. It differed drastically from her occasional clumsiness.

"Is it okay for you like this?" she asked.

"Yeah, 'til my arms fall asleep. I'll let you know."

"You're so good with people. It's like, I don't know, you just know them."

"How would you know that? I don't even know that."

"You have to be to have done what you did for so long. You sense things. You react." Sam looked up at him. "Like a lion."

He nodded. "Like Leo."

"Exactly. I want you to know how special you are."

"I'm just like everyone else, Sam."

Sam shook her head. "Everyone's different. That's what makes them special. Everyone has something to offer."

"I want to offer you whatever I can. For as long as I can."

She sighed contentedly. "So do I."

"There's a different energy here since you came. The nights when I'm alone are so long and quiet. But today passed in only a few hours. It's like I don't have time to get everything in that I want to do."

"That's the way it is when you're content. I haven't felt the time pass by so fast since..."

"What would your mom say?" he asked.

"She'd congratulate me."

"For what?"

"Finding myself. She'd raise a glass and say how well I've done finding myself underneath this beautiful sky by this beautiful lake with this beautiful man. That's exactly what she would say. When was the last time you felt like this?" she asked.

"Beautiful?"

"Content."

"Oh, that. Probably when I was with Michael in Europe. Before that...before my father died."

Sam felt a pang in her chest. "What about all those times when you came here?"

"It wasn't contentment, it was solitude. I'm realizing it's not quite the same when you can't share it with someone."

"I make you content?"

"When you don't ask so many questions, yeah." He wrapped his arms around her. "You're very good at it. The way you make me feel when you touch me." His fingers ran up her arms. "It's good. The way you look at me. I never thought I'd love the way a woman stared at me, wanting me. You make me talk about everything. Nobody's made me open up in a long time. Now I can't stop it. And, as for the other areas, well I'm very big on the concept of reciprocation. I could reciprocate with you all day. You know what I can't believe? That I'm the first man you've been with. I mean, I know I am. But, you're so good."

"Well, I have seen a lot of movies."

"I need to get my hands on some of those. How many times have you had before me?"

"Once."

"Who was she?"

"Someone I work with."

"A one-night thing? How was it?"

"Horrible," she said. "Embarrassing and humiliating and a complete disaster."

"I'm sorry. No, not really. If you'd liked it, you wouldn't have come to Morrah. We wouldn't have been able to do all these wonderful things."

"There's a lot more we haven't done yet."

"This is true. I'm getting sleepy just thinking about it," he said.

"Sleepy was not the mood I was hoping to create."

"Well, after all of that heavy breathing due to anticipation, exhaustion usually follows."

"In that case, can we sleep here tonight?" she asked.

"Sure, if you'd like."

She rolled over next to him. She looked up at the sky, memorizing the exact position of the stars that made up Alex's constellation. Sam wasn't sure how much time passed before she heard Alex's breathing, deep in sleep. She leaned on her elbow. The dirt and sand beneath the sheet settled under her. Ever so often a snore came out of his open mouth. It was a familiar sound. She remembered sleeping in her mother's bed. Her mother's noise was not as deep and sonorous, but the rhythm was the same. It would start out timid and eventually become loud enough to jostle the noisemaker out of a dream. His mouth was slightly open, his chest rising and falling. Then, as the note ascended, Alex stirred. He closed his mouth and swallowed.

Sam returned to the position on her back, moving closer so their arms brushed together. Her mind went back to this morning when she had seen his figure ready to collapse in the doorway. His confession made her certain that he didn't think this was a game. The feelings he showed were as true as hers. She wondered how long they would be together before things began to fall into a routine. It would happen eventually. Familiarity did that. The newness would fade, as would the feeling of being outlaws. However, the sparks she felt every time they touched would never go away, not altogether. That part of her would never be dead, now that he had awakened it. How long could they stay like this? Where were they going to go? The excitement made her breath quicken.

"Sam? Is my snoring keeping you up?"

"No."

He shivered. "Getting cold."

"I'll get another blanket."

"Just come here."

He brought his hand around her. Her leg made its way between his. She could feel his hipbone pressing against her.

"You're always warm," he said. "It's nice."

Sam drifted off. She woke at the feeling of his fingers. The fire had not quite gone out. It produced a soft, amber glow. The sound of the night animals had subsided. She heard his breathing, hesitant and slower. Her eyes began to make out the shapes around her. The outline of his shoulder against the sky was above her. The indentation of skin between his neck and shoulder was inches from her. She loved that part of him. She thought he called her name. His fingers made their way to the fabric covering her breast, fondling her. His hand traveled back over her hip to her thigh.

"Heavy sleeper, huh?" he whispered. "I wonder what would wake you?"

The tips of his fingers made their way into the top of her jeans. It took everything in her power not to gasp, feeling his nails glide against her skin. They traced the waist of her jeans, following the trail to the button. He moved his fingers and the button released. The zipper came next.

"You can stop pretending you're asleep."

She laughed, bringing her hands up to cover her face. He pulled her jeans from her hips, revealing the

top of her underwear. She spoke through the spaces between her fingers.

"I thought you were sleepy."

"Not anymore." He pushed her shirt up, exposing her belly. "What was her name?"

One side of his face was illuminated by the retreating fire. He was kneeling down at her side, curled up like a cat.

"Who?"

"The woman you slept with."

"Barbara."

"What did she do to you?"

The blood rose to her face. "What? I...she..."

He pressed against her. Her head fell back and he moved to her neck. His hand moved from her stomach to her jeans, maneuvering past her hips. Writhing beneath him, Sam leaned to one side as he worked the jeans down to her knees with one hand. His knuckles came back up to her stomach, the tips of his fingers played with the elastic on her underwear. She shivered from his touch and the cold air on her bare skin.

His lips were at her neck. "What did she do to you?"

His hand turned slowly. The palm rested against her stomach. She could feel the cold sweat against her skin. His hand disappeared under the cloth. Her body shuddered. The fingers moved gently over her, feeling the hairs that covered her. Sam spread her legs. The fact that her jeans were wrapped around her knees didn't even register. She felt his mouth curl into a smile, reacting to her movement. His lips left hers. She felt his fingers against her skin, parting the dark hair.

"Did she do this?"

The tips of two fingers found their way inside her, opening her to him. Sam bit her lip and moaned. Alex moved deeper. He found the spot he was looking for and began to circle it with the tips of his finger. He pressed, clenched, and rubbed the spot, watching her face. Her mouth opened. Her eyes moved frantically under the eyelids. Her body stiffened. His mouth went to her ear. The hot breath entered her as he listened to her soft pleas. Her body writhed. He knew she could continue that way indefinitely. It would be possible to get her to the point of screaming, begging for him to make her climax. But he had other plans.

He pulled away. Sam's body took a minute to recover. Cold sweat covered her entire body. His hand slid across her stomach, his fingers wet. Words escaped his mouth as his lips brushed against her ear.

"I know what else she did."

His lips hovered above the skin on her neck. They glided above the fabric of her T-shirt until they found her stomach. He pulled her jeans down to her ankles and off. Grabbing her knees, Alex parted her legs gently.

"I want you to watch me."

Sam pulled herself up on her elbows, trembling. Her whole body felt dazed, exhausted, and ready to go into spasm. It was as if she could still feel his fingers inside her. He was on the ground, between her legs.

"Alex..."

"Sh."

His hands slithered under her thighs. She brought her legs up, bending them. Her bare heels pushed against the sheets, embedding themselves in the ground. Her ankles pressed against his body, pinning him between her. His shoulders pressed against the bottom of her thighs, steadying her legs. His hands gripped her waist. His lips began to crawl across the wet fabric. His hair was all she could see falling against her stomach. She could feel a few strands stick to her stomach before he moved his head. His lips pressed harder against her. She felt his tongue. Circling her, pressing against the layer of fabric. She saw part of his face. Beneath the hair that hid his eyes, she knew he was watching her. He found the entrance to her with his tongue and went inside, bringing the fabric in as well. Covering her with his mouth, he sucked at the underwear, pulling it out.

Sam tried to control her moans. She watched as a hand left her waist. His arm leaned on the top of her thigh, gripping it under his arm. He was under one leg and atop another. The free hand snatched her underwear to the side in a blur. He was inside her with his tongue, darting in and around furiously. Licking and sucking. The assault on her senses made her scream. She fell back on the sheet, unable to rely on her muscles. Her hands searched for his hair, found him, and gripped tightly. She began reaching a climax. He continued moving in her, and she felt the wave rush over her. Her back arched up and she came again. All her thought processes shut down as he went into her again. Eventually he took pity on her and stopped. Exhausted moans croaked out of Sam. She felt his arms embrace her. She buried her face in his chest, closed her eyes, and slept until the dawn entered her darkness.

Chapter 34

~ Paradise ~

Sam gazed in wonder. The sight was exquisite, just as he described it. Alex reached for her as he took the first steps down the steep rock path.

"Give me your hand."

Grabbing it with her dirty palms, she followed. Sam had been challenged over the past few weeks. She'd been fishing, swimming marathon laps, and climbing every inch of the territory. Alex had let her take leisurely walks alone exploring the woods and town. As much as she wanted to spend every second with him, the reality was that at some point they would be away from each other. Eventually, he would fade from her view and she would walk, unsure and hesitant. But she had done it. The steps were slow leaving him and quick returning. Alex had ventured unaccompanied as well. The homecomings were always the same. A long hug, slow kiss.

"Don't let go of my hand," Alex said. "You alright?"

"Yeah."

"Come on, just a bit more."

The air was warm and humid. Sam leaned heavily on his arm and regained her balance. She always had a pleasant view when she went on hikes with him. But it wasn't always the lush trees or scenic skies that held her attention. Often she would stare at the back of his bare legs, outfitted in hiking boots and khaki shorts. Or she would glimpse his backside when he bent down to inspect the ground. His T-shirt would ride up and Sam would smile. Or his small shoulder blades appeared ready to pierce the loose fabric over them. The way they moved as he walked and stretched mesmerized her. When the path leveled out Sam looked out onto the hot spring. Alex released his grip.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

She pulled out her shirttail and wiped her neck. "Yes."

"It's like a sauna here." Alex dropped the small backpack and sat down on a rock. "Come here. Let me see how bad of a tumble you had." He lifted her shirt up and felt the skin. "Hm, going to have a nasty one there. No cuts at least." She felt his lips on her back. "OK?"

She turned to him. "All better."

He smiled and rubbed her neck. Sam sighed. The water pulsed over the jagged edges of rock that made up the mountainside. The deep cavern was outlined with moss. Thick foliage grew everywhere. The water made its way down the valley, leading into a river.

"We'll take the easy way out later." Alex motioned to a spot.

"You come here by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"You aren't scared? What if something happened to you?"

Alex shrugged. "Not many people would care."

Her eyes went to the spot at the base of the cliff. Steam rose up from where the water poured into the basin down the mountain. Alex stood up. He removed his shirt and shorts, standing with nothing but his boots on. Then he jumped in. He bobbed like a cork and tossed his head back. He dove under,

reappearing seconds later, floating on his back.

"You've got to try this."

Sam stood up and swallowed hard. Her mane of hair was released from its practical ponytail. Then she removed her boots, socks, shorts, shirt, and panties. She made her way to the edge, testing the water with her foot. She walked in, immersing herself in the warm water. She waded in up to her neck, her face and hair. Alex was a few feet away.

"Nice, huh?"

"Very."

"When I'm here I always feel like a character in a novel. Alone in the wilderness, communing with nature."

"Did you ever read Robinson Crusoe?"

"No."

"Not quite the same thing, but close."

Alex sank back into the water. He came up, pushing the hair out of his eyes. The water dripped from his nose, cheeks, and chin. Sam grabbed the base of his neck and pulled her face to his. She captured the drops of water with her lips. Alex found it arousing. Various parts of their bodies floated past each other, briefly touching. She swam away.

"Is that the only reason you brought me here?"

He followed her with long strokes. "I've always had this thing."

Sam drifted closer to him. "What?"

"Doing it in the water." He grinned.

"Have you?"

"No, but I've always wanted to."

"I don't know." A look of boredom ran over her face. "Doesn't particularly interest me."

She took a deep breath and dove under. Alex stared at the spot, waiting. Ten seconds passed. Fifteen. At 20 he swam to the area where she dove in. As he got near, he heard a splash at the small falls. Sam surfaced, gasping for breath.

"Don't do that! You scared the shit out of me." He waded over to her.

"It's shallow at this end." Sam found the bottom with her feet and stood, cupping the water as it streamed onto her face. "A lot warmer, too."

She moved into the falls. Her arms went above her head. The water sheathed her breasts and shoulders, pouring over her naked body. She leaned back, her hair heavy against her back. Tilting her head forward, she saw him drift in front of her, the surface of the water lapping against his chin. He walked toward her until he was against her. She felt his erection press into her hip. His hands went around her back.

"This could be dangerous," he said.

"Yeah."

He pulled her into the water. "I guess I never thought about the technical aspect. Maybe..."

Alex made his way to the edge, tugging her along. Sam's hands broke from his neck, laying her palms against the slab of rock. Her body waded against his, floating in the water. Her nipples brushed against his mid-drift and he moaned. He steadied his shoulders against the rock. Sam grasped the edges of the rock above his head. He grabbed the undersides of her thighs and helped her straddle him. He ran his tongue across his lips, as he guided her above him. Sam held onto the rock tightly, listening to the moans escape him. As her body rocked against his, splashing in the water, Alex fulfilled his fantasy quickly.

Chapter 35

~ Tracks ~

Sam was careful about contacting the outside world on her notebook. The façade had to be maintained. Cat was on another tour and sent her mail. Aggie kept her messages brief. It was Cil's messages that took most of her attention. They became more frequent and detailed as the weeks went by. They were all about Alex. Sam kept him aware of the situation. His brow crinkled and his lips pursed together. Vinto Gallery was making an example out of Cil. She had been persuaded to take an extended leave of absence. She was staying at Sam's house, watching over things for her. Aggie had been very supportive, offering her a position at VAPS. It would not be impossible for her to move on.

'I don't even care at this point anymore, Sam. I'm worried about Alex. No one has heard from him in over a month. It's not like it hasn't happened before. But he's never been in a situation like this. Vinto will be on the watch for him at his usual haunts. He knows that, I'm sure. I hope he finds his way here to the house. There had to have been a reason for his needing information on you.'

The messages went on like that. Sam sent words of comfort, feeling like a traitor and wishing she could ease her fears. But it wasn't safe for Cil to know what had transpired or their location.

"They've got a close eye on her. I wouldn't be surprised if the place is under surveillance. I don't know why I didn't think about that when I went there. That was a stupid move."

Sam shivered. "They have that much power?"

"Where money is a priority, so is power."

"When can she know?"

Alex put down his dinner plate. "Soon. It's time to make a decision. This has been a wonderful escape. But eventually your tracks and mine are going to lead them here. Someone's going to talk."

"So, what do we do?"

Alex looked into her eyes. "I won't hold you to anything. It's not fair to ask you to take all of this on with me."

Sam smiled. "You said I'd have to be willing to give up everything. I'm ready to do that."

Alex shook his head. "It's not going to be like this forever. Things won't always go the way they should. I'm not perfect. I can't offer you a world where nothing bad will ever happen."

"I know that."

Alex shrugged. "Then why do it? Why take the risk?"

"Duh, because I love you."

Alex sighed. "I love you, too. But that's not always enough."

"It is for me." She kissed his cheek. "That will always be enough."

He bowed his head. "You have to be sure. I don't want to prepare myself for this and then have to let go of you."

"I'm sure."

"I was thinking, we might be better off heading to Europe."

"Out of Vinto's reach?"

He nodded. "It's expensive, though."

"I have money."

"I was hoping we could use some of it."

"Absolutely."

"I'm going to need a few days to settle things. We have to leave quietly. It has to be like we were never here."

"Of course."

Sam cleaned the cabin, erasing all traces of their habitation over a month. Alex gave her instructions on the importance of sanitizing even the smallest objects.

"I'm not usually this anal, but I've never been here with a female. The locals have seen this stuff before. But extra cash in someone's pocket is all the reason they'd need to spill to a curious stranger."

Sam remembered the ease the storeowner had displayed, giving her directions to the cabin. The sum had not been much at all. She scrubbed a bit harder. Alex was throwing out a sparse amount of food they had in the cabinets. His hand stopped in mid-air. A bottle of scotch was inches from his fingertips. Sam walked into the kitchen, ready to clean out the bucket of antiseptic agents. The back of her hand wiped the sweat off of her forehead.

"Alex? What is it?"

He grabbed the bottle. "I don't even remember buying this. It must've been out of habit."

"The scotch?"

"I didn't tell you about that. My ritual." He opened the bottle. "The night before I leave I have my scotch and pills. I stay clean while I'm here, but the last night I pull them out. I didn't even bring them with me this time."

"What?"

"The Ambutols."

"Ambutols? Alex, what would you be doing with..."

Sam's voice trailed off. Her mother had been given the drug in increasing doses toward the end. It deadened the pain and brought her needed sleep. Leaning against the doorway she removed her gloves.

"I never wanted to go back. It was so hard every time. I thought dying here would be the best way to go."

He brought the opened bottle to his nose. Sam watched his eyes glass over. He placed the bottle in her hand. A tear flowed down his cheek. It was as if he was having a conversation with himself and she was intruding. He moved behind her, clutching her waist and shifting her body toward the sink. His chin leaned into her shoulder. It cut into her skin. One hand clasped over hers. He tilted the bottle, letting the liquor pour out. Then he let go of her hand and she placed the bottle in the sink.

"We should break it, like a christening." Alex kissed her neck. "Come on, we should finish up. That should do it."

Sam heard the exasperated sigh that escaped Alex as he returned the key to the cabin owner. The door was slightly ajar giving Sam a glimpse inside the storefront. She saw the elderly woman on the other side of the counter. Was anyone under 60 around here? Her visits into town—three stores and a couple of houses facing each other across a dirt path—made her aware that this place was a settling

ground for those of an advanced age. A few geriatric gentlemen sat in rusted aluminum chairs on the porch. Sam noticed them sign to each other. They were arguing over the best place to catch bass.

"In case you get any unexpected visitors inquiring about me..."

His quiet voice turned her attention back to the open doorway. Sam watched as a tightly wrapped amount of cash exchanged hands. The woman looked at it with a smile creeping up one side of her mouth.

"For a good customer as yourself." The bills were returned to his palm by the arthritic fingers. "Not necessary. Good luck, to both of you. Unless we have further business, I believe you best be going."

"Thank you."

With a wave of her hand she disappeared behind the door. Alex walked out. Sam took his hand.

"We'd best be going," she whispered.

"Yeah, we should."

Sam turned back, catching the woman staring at them from behind her counter. It was a look of contentment mixed with curiosity. The woman winked at her and looked back down at a magazine page. They walked hand-in-hand along the dirt path. Alex nodded to the old men on the porch signing farewell. They signed, 'Good luck'.

"I'm getting the feeling we've become the talk of this town."

Sam smiled. "They won't all keep quiet."

"Hopefully, we can get a head start before they sign anyone's ear off about us."

They stopped in front of a dusty garage door. Alex pulled out a key, opened the lock, and placed both in his bag. He pried the doors open. Sam winced at the squeaking the ancient metal made against the hinges. The dust cloud dissipated and the car inside was illuminated by the sunlight spilling into the confined space. A gray, metallic paint covered the transport, mud and dirt caked in various places. The windows were tinted.

"Not much to look at, but it'll get us back to Vancouver. I hope. Bought these for the trip back."

Alex grabbed a few gas cans propped against the garage wall. He went to the trunk and placed them inside. She opened the passenger side door and stepped inside. The driver door opened and Alex was soon beside her. Food wrappers, cans, bottles, and newspapers occupied much of the area as she tried to find a spot to rest her feet.

"Who do we have to thank for this lovely vehicle?"

"Lady by the name of Joanne, although she doesn't know she gave us use of it. I plan on returning it. It's okay. She's a friend. She's used to stuff like this."

He turned the key and the engine purred. His hands gripped the wheel and he pulled out of the garage. With a quick turn the town was behind them. Sam glanced back.

"We can travel without much concern for the rest of the day. Once we reach the first real town, it'll only be night travel from then on and you'll have to do most of the driving."

He had done this before, but never with this much at stake. Alex was acutely aware of the responsibility he had for Sam's safety and took extra precautions.

"We okay?" He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "It'll be alright. Once we make it to Europe, we'll be fine." He patted her knee. "I told you it wouldn't be easy. But I'm glad you were.

willing to come."

"I'm scared for you."

"You should be."

"What'll happen? If you get caught with me? I mean, I've gone willingly with you."

"They can do whatever they want, Sam. It won't matter what either of us says. Besides, me being caught with you is an afterthought. They're after me for a different reason altogether. It will just be a bonus with you. We have to be one step ahead of the game. Once we reach Europe, you can breathe easier. Believe me, I know compromises are a bitch."

Chapter 36

~ Compromises ~

—

"I don't want to leave you here."

The sky was beginning to turn amber as Alex pulled off to a side road lined with warehouses. They had reached the outskirts of the first full-fledged city.

"It's the only way and we both need sleep." Alex rubbed his eyes with the back of one hand.

"Remember what I told you."

"You didn't tell me about this."

"Because I knew you wouldn't like it."

His eyelids were barely able to stay open. He had been driving for 10 hours determined to put space between them and Williams Lake.

"Why do you have to stay alone in the car?"

"Because if I get caught napping in the car by myself it'll be a slap on the wrist...if the guard's in a good mood. I'll be sent on my way. If I'm caught with you..."

Sam nodded. "The motel down the street?"

"I'm told it's decent. Not spectacular, but you'll have a bed to sleep in for a few hours."

"When can I meet you?"

"As soon as the sun goes down I'll make my way back to this spot. Give me 15 minutes before leaving the motel. I don't want you out here alone."

"You know I won't sleep. I'll be worrying about you."

"If I thought we could chance it, I'd keep you here with me. I don't like this anymore than you do. Be careful." He moved close, kissing her ear. "Go."

It sounded unsure and desperate to Sam's ear, that one word. She grabbed her backpack and moved away from his warm touch. Her head began to pound as the cool air hit her and she peeked in one last time. The look on Alex's face made her heart ache. He was trying to hide his worry. She shut the door. She headed down the street, noticing the change in the sky. It was growing lighter.

Sam opened the door remembering how Alex had extolled the virtues of the 'suites' at The Jules. Her eyes searched the room before shutting the door behind her. Their different backgrounds made their ideas of what was decent quite different. The small window looked out onto the street. Through the layers of grime Sam searched. It was futile. He wouldn't be so close.

The backpack was thrown on the bed, coughing up a fine cloud of dust. She wouldn't be sleeping under those sheets. She folded her arms, tugging at her hair. A feeling began to creep into her. She had traveled all this way to be alone. She sat on the bed. Noises from the adjacent room could be heard. Something had been thrown and muffled voices increased in octaves. Sam took control of her breathing, closed her eyes, and imagined herself somewhere else. She turned her head and lay down in her darkness.

Sam delivered the key to the motel attendant at the front desk. It made a soft click against the wood countertop. She didn't even looking at Sam as she rifled through a magazine. Thankful for the

woman's lack of interest, Sam made her way out of The Jules, her eyes red. She had rubbed them raw in between her breakdowns. The idea of placing a cold, wet towel over her face had been pushed away after she had visited the bathroom down the hall. The faucet oozed a gray liquid. Sam almost vomited.

As she walked down the street a drugstore caught her attention. She went in, hoping to find some eye drops. The fluorescent light caused her to squint. She regained focus and looked around the sanitized space. A quick glance outside alerted her to the sunset. She would see Alex in a matter of minutes. The clerk smiled as she gave Sam a quick once over.

"Can I help you?" The voice was soft.

"I'm looking for some eye drops."

"Looks like you definitely need some. Aisle 2."

Sam headed to the aisle aware of the clerk's eyes on her. She was about halfway down the aisle when the entrance door chimed. She relaxed, thankful for some company.

"Susie, you won't believe it."

Sam looked over the eyewash shelf. This woman was older, wearing a waitress uniform. Sam grabbed a box and made her way back.

"What?" Susie asked.

"You know Merk's warehouse?"

"Of course I know Merk's warehouse, it's right down the street."

The other woman appeared flustered. "Alright. Don't get bitchy."

"Sorry. Long day. Can't wait to get out of here."

Sam placed the box on the counter, avoiding eye contact. She watched as Susie's manicured fingernails grabbed the solution and ran it over the scanner.

"Anyway, the guards caught an op near there."

Sam didn't hear Susan as she told her the price. Her breath stopped and she felt her heart pound. Her hand, in her purse, pulled out some cash.

"Excuse me?" Sam managed to pull out the money and lay it on the counter.

"Are you alright?" The voice was from the waitress. "I know, scary isn't it?"

"What did they do with him?" Susie asked, as she got out the change from the register.

Sam heard the coins clang around in her brain. She tried to calm the rage inside her. She didn't know what to do.

"They took him to the station. Hasn't been a sighting of one for about a month. Shelley said he was breaking into a car when they caught him."

Sam felt the change placed into her hand. The long fingernails brushed against her palm. She began to walk away.

"Hey, you forgot your bag."

"Oh, thanks." Her voice drifted out and cracked.

She felt sick as she recalled what the waitress had said. Caught by the warehouse. Breaking into a car. Sam held back the sour taste in her mouth. Why did she leave him? She steadied herself against the

wall. Her head was spinning. It was dark. Streetlights began to blaze on in succession down the path. Her hand moved along the wall, balancing her as she made her way to the corner. Ten feet of brick were between her and the view down that street. She wasn't sure if she wanted to look. She tried to think of excuses as to why he might be late. Sam pulled herself forward. Her eyes searched the dark street. He wasn't there. She felt a spasm of pain. Her eyes filled as she clutched her stomach. A couple was making their way down the street and she stumbled out of their way. She fell against the wall, sitting in a heap. The couple's footsteps could be heard falling against the concrete. They were laughing. Tears rolled down her face as she muffled a cry with both hands. They were soon out of sight in their own world. Sam's head fell forward. The darkness surrounded her. All she saw in her mind's eye was Alex as he whispered, 'Go'. He repeated the word over and over. She threw her head back, banging it against the wall. The dull pain throbbed into her skull. Her fists banged against the sidewalk. Maybe they would pick her up, too. She could go find the station. At least she'd be with him. It was all so hopeless.

"Alex."

"Sam."

Her eyes jerked open. She gasped as she threw her arms around him. Alex bent over her.

"Come on, get in the car before someone sees us."

He guided her into the transport. In seconds, he was next to her, driving off.

"What happened? Did someone hurt you? That's okay. You can tell me later. Do you need to be taken to a hospital or something?"

Sam shook her head. "I'm okay...now."

Alex stopped at the red light. "I parked on the street and didn't see you. I was expecting you to be where I left you. Then I saw this person sitting against the wall. You thought I left you?"

The honk from the transport behind them made them both jump. Alex looked up to see the green light. Sam wiped her face.

"I heard two women talking about an op that had been picked up."

Alex nodded. "I'm sorry I scared you like that. I'll get us out of here. Try to sleep."

"I don't want to. I just want to look at you."

He glanced over at her. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I went in that stupid drugstore to get drops for my eyes." She felt the purse in her lap and pulled out the box, fumbling it open. "I'm not leaving you. Not for so long. I don't care how you explain it. I'm not going to lose you. If you get caught, so do I." She opened the bottle. "It hurts too much."

Alex tilted his head. "Alright."

Sam waited for a red light before putting the drops into her eyes. She blinked, the liquid causing her vision to blur. After the bottle was capped and placed in her purse she turned in her seat and gave in to sleep.

Chapter 37

~ Goals ~

The remainder of the trip to Vancouver was relatively calm. They stayed together as Sam requested. There were departures for short times out of necessity mainly for food and hygiene. They slept in the transport. It was uncomfortable, but reassuring. Sam would sleep in the front, Alex in the back. A few close calls with guards were avoided by the wonderful 'extras' in Joanne's transport. Alex demonstrated to Sam that he could make his way into the trunk by pulling away the top of the seat, crawling in, and placing it back with hidden handles.

"Why didn't you tell me about that before?"

"Cause I'm not too keen on small dark spaces."

Ingenuity aside, suspicion on a guard's part could lead to inspection of the vehicle. An op in the trunk would require much more than a humorous anecdote. Their hopefulness was more apparent as they closed in on Vancouver.

"Not much farther."

Alex's arm wrapped around Sam's waist as she snuggled into his chest. His other hand gripped the wheel as the transport coasted down the straight stretch of highway.

"I'll drop off the car, ask Joanne for a favor, and in a few days we should be on our way to Europe. Just have to decide where we want to go."

"I want to see Jit."

"That would mean," he rubbed his palm against the side of her stomach, "Italy."

"I've always wanted to go to Europe, but I could never admit it to anyone. It was such a chore. Everyone in the Preservation felt that way about traveling overseas. Kind of ironic, considering some of the most sought-after artwork is in Europe."

"Even your mom?"

"Especially my mother. The culture...the attitudes about men and women bothered her."

"The acceptance of it? That doesn't sound like her."

She laughed. "That one meeting made you an expert on my mom, huh?"

"No," he stammered. "She shouldn't have been in that bar that night, but she didn't seem disgusted by it. Here we go, heading into Vancouver."

She sat up. "I'm excited."

Alex had timed the trip perfectly. They drove into the city as the sun began to set.

"Vancouver's a great place for an op. It's like a free-for-all. At least at night. Joanne says it's a different city when the lights go down. You don't have to worry about hiding walking down the streets. If you are well-behaved and know your place, that is."

Sam gazed out the passenger window. There were dozens of neon colors. They were at a red light. She watched males chatting together outside of a building painted royal purple with spotlights showcasing the gold leaf entrance doors. The letters X-Ta-C were engraved. Alex began to drive off. She looked back at the small group. That was when she noticed the profile of the well-dressed individual and grabbed Alex's arm.

"Sid!" She pointed back.

"At Ecstasy?"

"Should we go see him? Make sure he's okay?"

Alex bit his lip. "More than likely he's at Joanne's. Let's get there and see."

"It's that bad? You can't even go into a club without wondering if someone is going to be looking for you."

"If word has spread and the money is tempting enough for information on me, I can't go to my usual places. I'd get sold out in a minute."

"I could go in, though. No one's looking for me, yet."

"We don't know if anyone is looking for you yet. I don't want to change our course. We're almost there, we can't drop our guard."

"OK."

"At least we know he's alive. Of course, it would take an entire army to pick off Sid."

She laughed. "He thinks of you as his little brother."

"A pain in the ass little brother. I don't think he would be interested in seeing me at this point. I'm the reason he's not with Cil anymore."

"I'm sure he'd understand if he knew the whole story."

Alex shrugged. "You never know how someone will react."

The city dissolved, giving way to a beautiful development. Huge houses dotted the winding road with acres of land behind them.

Alex nodded. "Here we are."

He turned and headed up the driveway meeting a white gate looming above the transport. The female guard at the estate's gate made her way around the driver's side window. Sam watched eyes wide as the guard held her strapped revolver at her side.

"Returning a stolen vehicle is not as easy as I thought." He rolled down the window.

"Alright, please step out of...Alex?"

"Hi, Mand." He held his hands up. "Don't shoot."

"Jesus. Joanne's been wondering who got a hold of this."

"She didn't put out an all points bulletin, did she?"

The guard laughed. "Well, with all the connections she has downtown they'd be more than willing to assist. Especially the Vancouver PD. Smart ass." Mand peered into the car. "Who might this be?"

"A friend."

"You know how Joanne feels about..."

"I know, it's not a job." He looked at Sam. "Sorry about this. She really is a friend."

"Give me a second to let Joanne know." Mand made her way to the gate booth.

Alex looked at Sam. "Joanne doesn't run a 'service' hotel. Even if we can't stay here I can talk to her, clear some things up, and find a place for us in the city."

The seconds turned into 10 minutes. Mand ushered them in once the gate was opened. Alex pulled into the grounds. There were many trees massed together preventing passersby from getting a glimpse of the exquisite mansion. Sam sensed a theme. Large white columns extended up two stories creating a dramatic entranceway to the home.

"It's not quite as elaborate inside," Alex said.

"It's like a piece of art."

The front door opened and a petite woman walked out, her hands on her hips. "The culprit returns." Her blond hair was in a loose bun atop her head. "Oh, right, I forgot...you're wanted."

"Shit, you heard?"

"Come on in." She turned to Sam. "You're welcome as well."

Alex turned back, half-smiling. "Just so you know, Dante..."

"Dante spilled everything as soon as I asked where the transport was."

"It's my fault, not Dante's."

"Oh, I know. He was helping out a friend. I can forgive that. I had to seem somewhat worried to everyone else."

"I'm sorry."

"Hon, you have more important things to worry about than a stolen car."

They walked into a modernly decorated office off the entrance hall. Joanne sat behind the desk, motioning to the chairs. After pressing a button on her desk the office doors slid closed. The chrome furniture sparkled under the bright ceiling lights.

"I couldn't contact you. It was too dangerous. If you saw me, I knew you would tell Cil."

Joanne nodded. "She's so worried. She's called me everyday for the past month."

"I know. But if she knows, someone else might."

She clasped her hands on the desktop and glanced at Sam. "And you are?"

"Sam."

"Lovely, do you have a last name?"

"Dumas."

"Sarah's daughter? My God." Joanne grabbed a pen, tapping it against the desk. "I haven't seen you since you were five. I'm sure you don't remember me. I was an acquaintance of your mother. I was very sorry to hear about your mother. She was a good woman."

"Yes, she was. Thank you."

Alex steered the conversation back to the topic. "We need your help. How fast can you get us to Europe?"

"Depends on how much you can afford."

Sam reached into her jacket and pulled out a wad of 100s. Joanne counted the cash.

"How about this, I'll front the cash and get you out of here by the morning." She pushed the money back to Sam across the table.

"Jo, no."

She waved her hand. "Shut up, Alex. You know that the longer you stay in Vancouver the more dangerous it'll be. Your mother will owe me when she finds out. Give me a few hours." She opened her drawer and pulled out two keys. "Second floor, 4 & 5. I'll let you know what we come up with. Don't worry, Sam, you're safe here."

"Thanks." Sam grabbed Alex's arm. "Sid?"

"Has Sid been around?"

"Cil's Sid? No. Haven't seen him. Just like I haven't seen anyone by the name of Alex Brennan or Sam something or other."

He looked at Joanne and smirked. "Thanks."

Sam wrapped herself around Alex's relaxed body on the bed in Room 4. Alex would break the rules this one time. As long as they didn't get caught doing anything, Joanne wouldn't be that upset. He wondered if Joanne was putting the events together in her head. How obvious was it? She hadn't asked many questions, but she was curious as to why he needed to get to Europe with a female. She'd probably gone through it more times than she could count. Still, those other times were different. The op requesting safe passage hadn't been the Alex Joanne had known since before she could remember.

He felt her cheek rub against his chest as she dug into him with her body. Alex stroked her hair. It felt as if she were trying to get inside him. The close quarters necessitated the intertwining of their limbs. He breathed in deeply.

"Sam? How much money do you have left?"

"About \$1,000 in cash. How long will that last?"

He looked up at the ceiling doing some math in his head. "Not long in Italy. I don't want to rely on anyone else's help. Joanne's already doing too much." The phone chimed on the nightstand next to the twin bed. "Yes?"

"You've got two tickets for a plane to Montreal at 7:00 AM. From there you get on another to Rome. Can you handle it from there?"

"Think so. Thanks."

"I should have the tickets around midnight. Can I talk to Sam?"

"Sure." He handed the phone to Sam.

"Hello. I will. Thank you." The phone exchanged hands as Sam motioned to the receiver.

"What'd she say?"

"She wants you to pick the tickets up in her office. She doesn't want to have to get up early to see us off." She paused. "Look after him, he tends to get into trouble."

Alex sighed. "I should have told her you were in the other room."

"That was the other thing she told me. She thought I should get some rest before the trip."

Alex looked at her. "You're leaving me?"

She leaned over him. "Just for a while. She's been so great. I don't want to take advantage."

He grabbed the back of her neck. "Of her or me?"

"Both."

She kissed him one more time before he released her. The key to Room 5 was on the dresser. She picked it up and placed it in her pocket.

Alex asked, "How would you like me with black hair? Joanne always has dye and other helpful things around for a troubled op. It would be a good idea for the plane trip."

Sam smiled. "I think I'd like it."

"OK. I'll see you in the morning."

"Night."

The empty dye bottle was tossed in the garbage after his shower. He jumped out and wrapped a towel around his waist. His reflection looked back at him. He picked up a comb and ran it through his jet-black hair. One more thing to do. The silver scissors sparkled against the white basin. Another towel was used to wipe his chest. Alex turned when he heard the knob to the bathroom door strain. He held the door open as Sam slid inside. He closed and locked the door, opening the towel with both hands. Sam glimpsed his naked body and giggled. He went back to the sink. She leaned against the counter next to him.

"I like it."

"Yeah? It's temporary."

"Doesn't matter."

"Good, then you can help me with one more thing."

His hands went around her waist and sat her on the counter. Sam's legs opened, letting him move closer. Her hands glided up and down his wet back.

"Will you cut my hair? I thought it would be good to cut it short."

Sam wrinkled her nose. "I don't think that's a good idea. With these," she grabbed a few of the wet locks on his forehead, "you can hide that beautiful face."

He rubbed his nose against hers. "I guess you're right."

Her hands went to his chest. "If we start, we won't be able to stop."

"I can't believe it's been a whole week."

She sighed. "Soon. I'll leave you alone so you can do whatever you have to. I'll see you in the morning."

"Thanks again." Alex held the tickets in his hands.

Joanne nodded. "Does Cil know? About you and Sam?"

Alex sat down. "Not yet."

"She has to know something soon. She's going nuts."

"I'll get in touch with her when we get to Europe."

"It's your call."

"Is word around town about me?"

"Sid's been keeping an ear out. He hasn't heard anything yet. We'll keep tabs on the situation."

Sid knew how to find information. If Sid said people weren't talking about him that was comforting.

"Think I can risk a night out?"

"What for?"

"Has Sid come in tonight?"

"Usually doesn't get back 'til sunrise like the rest of you vampires. I'll send someone to look for him."
Joanne eyed him for a moment. "I think you should be fine. I like that color, by the way. You should
go with someone else, though."

"I'll be fine."

"Call me if you get a vibe."

She handed him a pager. Alex headed back up to the second floor, opening his room to place the
tickets on the dresser. He stopped at Sam's door. He debated knocking. No, she'd want to come. He
touched the door briefly before he moved out into the night.

Chapter 38

~ Habits ~

Alex stepped out of the transport letting the valet in as he was handed him a ticket. Looking up at the club, he felt at home. X-Ta-C was packed. A few stragglers were huddled outside. There was no sign of Sid. He'd make the rounds before finishing up back here. He knew the way Sid worked. This was one of his favorite spots. His too.

The bouncer looked Alex over as he gestured him inside. The smoke hung in dense clouds from the ceiling. The purple strobe lights matched the interior of the club. Alex pushed through the jammed bodies and scents of cologne and perfume. Yelling over the music, he gave the bartender his order. He turned in his stool and scoped out the people. It was hard to get a clear look at anyone.

"Hello." A female parked in the seat next to him and stroked his palm.

Alex turned, smiling. "Hi."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Thanks, but I've got it."

"Looking for anything in particular tonight?"

He smiled. "Some cash."

Her grin widened. "I might be able to accommodate that request. Want to go somewhere to talk it over?"

"I'll only be going to one other place tonight."

He motioned to the paisley curtain where there was an ornate yellow door. Behind that were dozens of booths used for unspecified purposes, at least if the authorities questioned the owner.

"But you can make much more..."

"Sorry, like I said, I'll be staying here."

The woman looked him over. "How much?"

"Depends on what you want?"

Alex was exhausted and there was still no sign of Sid. The crowds had thinned. In the space of four hours he had gone through a whole pack of condoms. Its former residence in his pocket held an enormous roll of cash. He would no longer accept charity. He had to take responsibility for Sam. Once in Europe he would attempt to get a real job. It wouldn't be hard. He had a few odd occupations in France. He could do it in Italy. Mira might be able to find something for him. She'd done it for Ajit. He had virtually no money left. This was the best way he could come up with the funds. He forgot the faces of the dozen men and women as soon as they paid him. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Sam's face and found the energy to continue. He had close to six grand. Looking at the clock he saw the minute hand tick past 4:30 and paid for his drinks.

The valet took his ticket and told him it would be a few minutes. He made his way to the exterior club wall and leaned against it. The cold air made him shiver. A laugh bolted him upright. His eyes made contact and he swallowed. It was amazing how he looked virtually the same since he left him in that hotel in Vienna. Michael stood there in his signature jeans and T-shirt. His taut body bulged against his clothes. Alex folded his arms and waited to feel something. Almost four years. He remembered

how much he had wept over this person. Now, he was here and nothing. The transport pulled up. Alex walked right by Michael. The wind wafted his scent over to Alex. He recognized the cologne and the smell of sweat beneath it. Still, there was nothing. Walking over to the driver's side, he tipped the valet.

"Thanks."

Michael glimpsed him for a brief second. Alex waited for recognition to fill his face. It came and Michael's head whipped back. Alex nodded and hopped into the car. When he glanced in the rearview mirror, he noticed the small figure staring at his transport.

"You were right," he whispered.

He turned on the radio and turned the corner.

Chapter 39

~ Destination ~

Alex took a long shower when he returned to the Hagley Estate. He changed into a fresh pair of jeans and T-shirt and knocked on Sam's door a little past 5:30.

"Sam? We've got to be at the airport by 6:00." He heard the click of the lock. "Did you have a good night? What'd you do?"

Sam smiled. "You don't like it?"

His eyes moved to Sam's back. She had cut her hair above her shoulders. The brown color was replaced with a deep rich red. It reminded him of the Merlot he was so fond of drinking.

"I got rid of some excess baggage," she said.

"And the color?"

"I always wanted to do something with it. Anyway, Cil changes her hair color as often as she changes her mind."

He laughed. "Just don't go pink on me."

She brought a finger to her chest, crossing it. "I promise. You look tired. You didn't sleep?"

He shook his head. "Planning."

"Give me five minutes, OK?"

"I'll meet you downstairs."

Mand handed him a note before they headed into the transport. Alex thanked her. He opened the note and read the words 'Good luck' scrawled in Joanne's writing. He stuck the piece of paper in his pocket. Sam threw her backpack onto the back seat next to Alex's. She was getting used to traveling light.

When they reached what Sam guessed was an airport by op-standards, Alex drove to the baggage area in a huge warehouse. As the aluminum walls engulfed the small vehicle Sam's eyes traveled to the high ceiling. Boxes filled every available area. The knot in her stomach solidified her assumption that this would not be like other plane rides. A burly woman greeted Alex. Sam watched them exchange a few brief words. Alex motioned to her and she grabbed her backpack. They went around the back of the warehouse where Sam spotted the huge runway. A plane was at the end ready for takeoff.

"We're getting on that? What is it?"

"A 727, I think." Alex laughed. "They stopped making them a couple hundred years ago."

"We're going to fly in something that's a few centuries old? Are you crazy?"

"Hey, it's the only way. It's in great condition. Ops use these planes constantly."

He grabbed her arm and headed for the plane as a collapsible stepladder was positioned alongside the hull. The plane ride made Sam sick. Alex comforted her, providing her with multiple airsick bags. It was a much longer flight than she was used to.

"Oh, God. I don't think I can make it through another one of these planes."

"The other one's a 747. It's a little bigger. You should feel better on that one."

Sam moaned and reached for the bag. She'd never heard of a 747 either, but it didn't cause Sam's stomach to do cartwheels. His confidence was high enough to have her rest her head against his chest. She welcomed the comfort of his warm body. Her arms wrapped around his waist. Alex placed an arm over her shoulder, taking in the view outside his window. The clouds provided a soft cushion beneath them. His gaze became heavy as sleep overpowered him. Sam's breathing deepened. It wouldn't be long before they would be free. He relaxed, letting the darkness surround him.

The alien surroundings bustled around Sam and Alex. They walked down the cobbled street with hardly an acknowledgement given to them. A transport sped them away from the ancient runway toward the city of Rome. *It's in the middle of the day.* That thought ran through her mind again as she walked past hundreds of people. The fact that she saw dozens of other males made the scene even more surreal.

"You shouldn't be this shocked. You were in Morrah."

Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her through the crowds, past dozens of carts selling sundries. There were religious symbols on sale everywhere. Sam stopped at one, intrigued. She tugged at Alex alerting him to stop. The foreign language spilled into Sam's senses making her feel disoriented. It felt like a dream. She turned a small statue of an angel over in her hand. She looked to Alex.

"A hundred dollars." Alex cleared his throat.

Sam placed the statue back on the cart and looked around. He led her on, wanting to get out of the crowds. Sam marveled at the fountains and statues decorating the streets.

"It's so beautiful."

Alex stopped, looking up. "This might work."

A door was opened and Alex motioned to her. Walking in, she was greeted by a glorious mural reproduction of DaVinci's 'Last Supper' on the opposite side of the room. Alex headed straight for the hotel clerk sitting behind a desk.

"Ciao, quando per uno stanzo di letto?"

Mira had taught him some phrases the last time he was in Italy a few months ago. The clerk glanced from Alex to Sam.

"Uno o due letti?"

Alex put up one finger, smiling. The clerk gave the price. It wasn't as much as he had thought. Gladly, he forked over the cash. Pushing the ledger across the desk she handed him a pen. He scrawled 'Alexander Hamilton' on the sheet. The woman handed him a key and pointed to the stairs.

"Grazi."

"Prego."

Alex walked over to Sam. "I got us a room. Come on."

He went first up the stairs. There were only four doors along the hall. Alex matched the number of the door to that on the key. Sam wondered what the room would look like as the key turned. She was pleasantly surprised.

"It's clean."

Alex walked over to the bed, throwing his backpack on it. Sam studied the shiny marble floor. The jade reflected the furniture out of its high polish. A rug with a floral design occupied the middle of the floor in front of the bed. The mattress was draped with a light lace sheet. Fluffed pillows rested

beneath the thin fabric. A dresser stood against one wall. Sam walked over to an unusual piece of furniture. A huge basin rested on the top of a small table. A towel hung on a rung to its side and underneath was an equally large pitcher.

"It's to wash yourself," Alex said. "Don't worry, it's just for show."

He motioned to the open door behind him. Sam peered in at a toilet and sink. It was small, but theirs.

"Thank goodness."

"Why don't you relax, get situated." He headed for the hall door.

"Where are you going?"

"Aren't you hungry? I'm starved. We passed a bakery down the street. I'm going to pick up a few things. I'll only be a bit."

"OK."

"Be good while I'm gone."

He opened the door and disappeared. Sam headed for the bathroom to refresh herself from the exhausting trip.

They ate a dozen pastries between them, sitting on the bed. Sam couldn't stop eating. It was too delicious for words. She could only murmur between gulps. It had been ages since she had tasted food this exquisite. Alex sat back against the bedpost.

"Didn't I tell you?"

"Mm." She grabbed a crumpled napkin and wiped her mouth. "I'm going to love Rome."

"Can't love it for too long, we've got to get to Padua in a few days."

Sam leaned back on one of the pillows as her hands pressed against the fold of the sheet. She looked up at Alex. His black hair had fallen in front of his eyes as he looked at her upside-down. She stretched on the bed and yawned.

"You sleepy? We can take a nap. They do it all the time in Italy."

Sam nestled into the pillow. "They've got the right idea."

She woke to find Alex wrapped around her. She ran her fingers through his hair. His breath fell between her breasts. That alone was enough of a stimulant. She calculated how long it had been since they had been together. Almost two weeks. Too long. Sam glanced at her watch and remembered the time difference. The light funneling through the open windows had become softer. It sounded as if the city was picking up steam. She could hear a song playing from a radio on the street below their room. Sam felt herself gain momentum as well.

The tips of her fingers ran over the outline of his ear. She grabbed at his lobe. His cheek rubbed against her chest. His nose excited her nipple as he touched it. Sam pushed him off her. His lips parted as he began the snoring Sam had grown accustomed to. She watched him sleep for a short time before getting out of the bed. Sam didn't hear him when he woke up.

"Hey," he called to her quietly.

She was situated on the bench under the window. "Hi."

"How long have you been up?"

"A couple of hours."

"You like it?" He nodded to the city past the glass.

"Yeah."

"I thought you would."

Moving to the edge of the bed, she watched him snatch himself from sleep. He stretched, his back arched up as his head buried further into the stacked pillows.

"Thank you." Sam smiled, caressing the side of his leg.

"You're welcome."

"I was thinking about everything you've done...to be with me. It was so much."

"It was worth it."

Her head went to his stomach. She rested her cheek on him, looking up at his face. His hand combed through her hair. His smile mixed with fondness, realizing he missed the long strands.

"Was it? Is it what you want?"

"You're all I want."

She felt her heart skip. Closing her eyes she concentrated on the rise and fall of his stomach. Alex reached over to the night table, grabbing the pastry bag. The crinkling of the paper made Sam open her eyes.

"One of these wouldn't be bad either."

He pulled out a small confection covered in powdered sugar and bit into it. The powder covered the tips of his fingers and rained over his chin and mouth. Sam licked her lips and crept up his body. Alex stopped chewing. Her mouth moved toward the remaining piece in his fingers. He brought it to her open mouth. She bit into it, enjoying the mix of flavors and textures. Alex breathed in deeply. Her hand stroked his forearm and wrapped around his wrist. His powdered fingers pushed against her lips. She moved her lips over them. Alex stared, enraptured. The tips were sucked lightly. Sam went to his mouth, taking all of him in between her lips. Their tongues mingled together as they moaned contentedly into each other.

She broke from him, rising off the bed. Grabbing his ankles, she dragged his legs over to the side. Alex turned with her. The sheets twisted as they moved with his backside. She dropped his feet against the marble floor. Surprisingly cold, he hitched his breath and propped himself on his elbows. Sam smiled, a blush rising to her cheeks. Alex shook his head.

"What?"

She tucked her short hair behind her ears and she bent over his body, kissing his lips. Her lips were on fire. She left him again. Alex's mouth opened as he watched her kneel between his legs. Her breasts heaved under her shirt and onto the edge of the bed. Her fingers moved under his T-shirt, exposing his mid-drift. Then they gripped the top of his jeans and pulled him to the edge of the bed. The violent tug caused him to fall back. Alex laughed and looked up at the ceiling. His laughter stopped when he felt her fingers on his zipper.

His thighs gripped the sides of her body. Alex bit his lip when she pulled his jeans from his hips. He was exposed to her. He closed his eyes as her hot breath caressed him. He could feel himself mounting with excitement. Her hand touched him first. He felt her fingers glide across him with acute deliberateness. It was maddening. Alex gripped her with his thighs tighter. Her hand wrapped around him, cupping him, wet with moisture. He moaned as it moved up and down. His eyes bolted open

when he felt her lips against him. He thought he would climax at that instant. Controlling himself, he grit his teeth. When she took him into her mouth his breath hissed between his teeth. He wanted to watch her, however he was afraid any movement would disrupt her.

"Sam?" he whispered.

Her mouth left him. His heart dropped. He bit his lip, asking the question to the ceiling.

"Can I watch you?"

"Yes."

He rested himself on his elbows making eye contact with her. Her face was hot. A blush rose and she closed her eyes. Her hair, pushed behind her ears, framed her face. His mouth opened with hers. His chest caved in as he watched her lips move on him. She traveled slowly. Her tongue was against him in her mouth. He felt the climax come in another wave. He held back.

"Sam...I'm..."

Her lips left him. "What?"

"I'm going to..."

"I want you to."

Her lips enclosed him. He quivered underneath her. His hands found her head, cradling it. He felt her move up and down as his fingers traveled into her hair. He moved into her, matching her motion. He heard her moan, felt it on him. That was all it took.

Alex lay in a state of exhaustion. Sam's hand still gripped his thigh. He looked at the ceiling. He had spilled into her mouth unexpectedly. He knew it had shocked her. Most of him had made its way into her mouth. The rest had dripped onto his skin and pants. He sat up, wanting to see her. She was kneeling with a hand at her cheek, looking at the wall. Her face was still red.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Why are you sorry?"

"I didn't do it right."

"Yes, you did."

Her knuckles scraped against her lips. "I didn't really know what to do...at the end."

"You do whatever you want."

"I can't believe...I have the taste of you in my mouth."

He pulled her up to him. He kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He licked the outside of her mouth, her lips. He looked at her.

"Can you still taste me?"

She nodded. He gripped her waist, pulling her onto the bed. His hands moved under her thighs, bending her legs so she was straddling his naked groin. He moved against her pants, amazed he was becoming aroused so quickly. He clenched her backside, pushing him against her. She followed his lead, grinding her body. One hand traveled up her back under her shirt playing over her skin. She shivered and arched her back. Taking her shirt by the collar he tore it open. Buttons popped and the fabric fell away. Sam's head rolled back. He pulled himself up furiously searching for her nipples. She moaned when his mouth found its destination. He held her in his hand, licking her. He rubbed the tip of his nose against her breast, then bit her. He sucked long, hard, driving her to the edge of

rapturous divinity. In seconds her pants were off. He took his time gliding in and out of her. She wrapped her legs around him, urging him on with the movement of her hips. They filled the room with the moaning and panting and they didn't rest until morning.

Chapter 40

~ Sights ~

Sam lazed on a chair in the outdoor café, staring at the marble fountain in the middle of the square. Alex came back to the table with two small coffee cups. He grinned at Sam as he placed one in front of her.

"You have to sip slowly."

"OK." She wrapped her fingers around the hot cup.

He pulled a chair close to her and sat down. The coffee was brought to his lips. Sam took his advice, drinking slowly. The intensity of the coffee startled her eyes open wide. Sam noticed a man and woman stroll by, tugging a boy in between them. He looked around three and was taking quick steps. She turned to Alex.

"Your parents didn't get to do that much, huh?"

He shook his head. "Not like that, for anyone to see. That's the way things work."

"What was his name? Your father."

"Ryan Stetson."

"Why don't you have his last name?"

Alex shrugged. "I think it was safer for him. Anyway, it was only a name. Why aren't you named after your father?"

"You mean that test tube labeled Insemination 18? Do you have a picture of him? Please don't ask me the same thing."

Alex's gaze softened. "I think Cil does, somewhere. Only a few."

"Do you remember him?"

"It gets harder, you know? It's getting to be so long ago." The cooled coffee was drunk quickly. "I think it's time to let Cil know I'm OK."

"Me too."

"What about you? Should we tell her?"

Sam looked over to the fountain. "Not yet. It could still be risky if someone found out I was with you."

"She'll be on the first plane to Padua as soon as she gets a message from Mira."

"Then that's when she'll find out."

Sam tapped a few buttons on the keyboard. "She could be on now. I could enable the VC if she is. Disconnected it while we were at the lake."

Alex stared over her shoulder. "VC?"

"Video Conference. Sorry, I keep forgetting you're not used to this." She smiled.

"Just not used to technical language. I've seen Cil use all this junk."

She laughed. "Junk?"

"Junk complicates things." He sat next to her on the bed.

Sam opened a window. "All you have to do is type a message."

"Won't she know it came from you?"

"Don't worry. I'm good at fixing all this complicated junk. It's OK, really." Sam shifted the notebook across the sheet so it was in front of him.

Alex sighed. "It'll take me forever to type it out."

"Take your time."

Alex fumbled, reading over the few first words. "Shit, how do you get rid of something?"

Sam pointed out the delete and backspace keys. The key was hammered at rhythmically. It intrigued Sam to watch him grapple with this foreign entity, deliberating over what exactly to say and how. The words came slowly. When he was done he asked Sam to read it.

Cil.

It's me. Been a while. Want you to know I'm OK. I'll get word to you somehow. It's not safe this way. I wanted to apologize for everything, but I don't know where to start. There's no easy answer to any of your questions. I'm still figuring it out myself. I never meant for you to be hurt by this. I hope you believe that. There's not much more I can do except say I'm sorry. And I love you.

Alex

Sam's eyes filled with tears. "I think that'll make her feel much better."

"I hope so. At least for now."

Alex watched as Sam backspaced, erasing his name. "Just to be safe."

"Will she know? Maybe I can send her a hint or something."

Sam stared at the screen. After a minute, she typed the name *Stetson*.

Alex smiled. "Good. How do I send it off?"

"Just press 'Enter'."

Finding the button as his eyes lit up. "Your message has been sent. Easy."

"That's one of the easiest parts."

"I think we can manage one more day here before heading to Padua."

"Can we see the sights?"

"We can try."

The ruins of the ancient city were traversed by Sam and Alex the next day. The churches, the statues, the museums. They got to act like tourists instead of wanted criminals. Sam's knowledge in the art and history intrigued Alex. The sparkle in her eyes when she examined a painting or statue reminded him of Cil. The crumbled remains of the roman Coliseum proved disheartening.

"I'd seen so many pictures of it. It's a shame the earthquake did so much damage."

"I wish I'd gotten a chance to see it before it happened, too. It was over a year ago."

"You didn't come to Italy with Michael?"

Alex shook his head. "We pretty much kept ourselves to the northern part of Europe."

They walked on, Sam's hand in the crook of his arm. Night was approaching as the sun blazed a brilliant red in the sky. He kissed her forehead.

"I'm going to miss this. It was like a real vacation."

Sam's cheek rested against his arm. "We'll leave in the morning?"

"Yeah. I thought we'd take the train to Padua."

"A train? Never done that before."

"You'll like it. It's a quick trip. Only a couple hours I think. I was going to..." He cleared his throat.

"I was going to get us our own private room on the train."

"Oh." Sam smiled. "I'd like that."

"I thought you would. Of course, considering the workouts you've been giving me the past couple of days I won't be able to do much, but sleep on the train."

"I'll have to take it easy on you tonight, then."

"I didn't mean that," Alex whined.

"I don't think you'll have any problem." Her tongue trailed between the slit of his mouth.

"Me either."

Sam stared out the train window, the fields moving in a pale green blur beyond the glass. She turned toward the sound of the door.

"Hey. Did they have anything good?"

Alex pulled a white bag from behind his back. Hopping on the seat next to her, he ripped it open. Sam eyed a napoleon pastry. He held it between his fingers and approached Sam's lips with it. Opening her mouth, Sam bit into the corner as flakes of the delicate dough snowed down into her lap. Alex leaned in and bit the other corner, rubbing his cheek against hers. They chewed slowly. He handed the pastry to Sam and let his head occupy her lap. Sam fed him the rest of the dessert.

"You excited?"

"Yeah, I can't wait to see Jit."

"Did you and he ever...fool around?"

Sam shook her head. "No. We couldn't, anyway."

"There are other things you could've done." He tried to hide a grin. "Did you want to?"

"Of course I wanted to." A sigh released from Sam's chest. "Ajit was never interested in me that way."

"He doesn't like women?"

"He loves women. He loved my mother."

"Did she..."

"No, Alex. My mother isn't...wasn't like me."

"You sure?"

"That's the one thing I can say confidently after all of this."

Sam fumbled with the chain around his neck, pulling out the locket from under his shirt. She clasped it

between two fingers and pried it open with her nails. Alex watched her quietly as she stared at the picture of herself in the locket.

"Do you have any pictures of you when you were little?"

"Actually." He pulled out his beat up wallet. "I think there's one in there."

Sam opened it while Alex snapped the locket shut. She searched the folds and pulled out three photos.

"That's Sid with Cil."

Sam smiled at the photo. "How old is he here?"

"Thirteen, I think."

"You two could be blood-related. You look so much alike."

"I know. Weird."

Sam went to the next one and her mouth opened slightly. Alex feigned a hurt expression.

"I didn't look that bad at five."

"No. It's a recent one."

A mild look of shock passed over his features. Sam felt a twinge of jealousy. In the photo, Alex was seated on the hood of a car, his boot heels wedged into the front bumper. A dark, handsome man was next to him. Their arms were draped around each other, Alex's hand falling on the man's chest. She noticed the intimate smile on both their faces. They were happy.

"He's gorgeous." Sam gave him a reproachful look. "You're allowed to say it. Where were you?"

"Vienna. That was a week before he left. I threw out all the other pictures."

"Why'd you keep this one? You couldn't give up on him entirely."

Alex shrugged. "I guess. I wanted to remember what he looked like."

"I don't think you'd be able to forget this guy."

Alex smiled. "I don't miss him anymore, Sam."

Alex ached let her know he had seen Michael the night before they left for Vancouver. That he felt nothing for him. But telling her that would mean explaining why he had been out. He wasn't sure how she would respond to that. *Even though I did it for her.*

Sam looked at the final picture. "You were so adorable. You look exactly the same." She eyed Alex. "Same grin and everything."

"Is that good? I would hope I've changed a little bit."

Her lips pursed together. "Your nose is bigger."

"Thanks."

"But I love your nose."

She put the pictures back in his wallet. He stuffed it into the rear jean pocket.

His body arched up and the back of his head buried itself deeper against her thighs for a second. Sam laid her arm across his chest. The tips of her fingers ran over his pout. A nail rubbed the top of his nose then traveled up the slope. He flared his nostrils. Sam giggled.

"Want another one?" Alex nodded as Sam delved into the bag. "What are these again?"

"That's a canoli."

"I like these."

"You like everything."

Sam gave him a dirty look and Alex broke down. His lips shook and he bit down on the bottom one.

"Maybe I'll just have it then."

She placed the canoli wrapped in wax paper on his shirt. Opening the corners, she dipped a finger into the soft, cool cream of the pastry. It went down smoothly. She went back to it a few more times before looking at Alex. He was upset.

"I want some."

Sam placed more filling on a finger and brought it to Alex's mouth. He licked the cream off in one quick motion. The remaining pastry was brought to his lips again. Sam tried to stuff the entire piece in his mouth. Alex chewed furiously. Sam laughed holding her stomach with her hand.

"Funny." He licked his lips and took her by the wrist. "I missed some."

He licked each fingertip. Her other hand stroked his hair, combing it back against her leg. They buried themselves deep into the black strands. His lips surrounded the tip of one finger. He sucked it into his mouth. Sam was enticed by the action, the cheeks caving in, revealing the sharp outline of his bone and jaw. His tongue swirled around her finger. It tickled. His tongue darted in and out. Sam slid two more in and watched his open mouth. Alex gave them each a final suck and sat up. He grabbed her by her shoulders and coaxed her onto his lap. Her face was flush. Lazily, she stroked the small of his back under his shirt. He unbuttoned her shirt with his thumb and forefinger and slid them inside.

He found the soft peaks of her breasts and massaged them, one at a time. Her eyes closed and head leaned back. She rubbed the side of her face against his stiff lap. The rhythm of the train running over the tracks helped Alex keep time. He counted beats as his fingers traveled over her nipples. He watched her begin to grind her hips against the seat. His eyes widened as her hand went to the waist of his pants.

"Help me."

The request was soft as she turned to her side. Alex undid the button while Sam pulled down the zipper. Her arm grasped his hip and thigh, trapping it under the crook of her arm. He could feel her exposed breast against his other thigh, brushing the fabric of his pants. Alex pulled himself out for her. Sam held him tightly and all Alex could see as he gazed down was a mass of red hair.

"Sam, just be careful, OK? We might make an emergency stop or hit a bump or something."

He felt Sam laugh while he was in her mouth. Her mouth moved around him and Alex gripped her bottom. He leaned head back on the seat. The train moved beneath them and Alex closed his eyes. She took her time.

Alex plunged his hand between her thighs. His fingers found the soft, wet flesh and moved into her with abrupt force. Sam was taken by surprise. It took her a few seconds to assimilate. He probed her with his fingers and increased speed. Sam took him in further and Alex groaned. When she began to spasm Alex gave in and released into her mouth. Sam followed.

A fulfilled smile spread across his face. Sam pulled herself up onto him, grasping his neck. He slid her pants up for her. Opening his legs, he allowed her bottom to slide onto the seat. Cradling her back with his arms, he listened to her quick breathing.

"Did you think you'd found the perfect person with Michael?"

Alex was unprepared for the question. "Is that what you were thinking about all this time? Sam, it's not going to do either of us any good to bring up stuff that's happened in the past."

"I know, I was just wondering. You spent a long time with him. He must have meant a lot to you."

"He did."

Her breath slowed. "We've only been together for a short time, compared to him. You could get tired of me." She sat up and looked at him, his eyes a soft shade of blue. "I'm serious."

"You still think I'm playing with you? You have to learn to trust me."

"I do."

"Then show it," he smiled, "by shutting up."

She shook her head defiantly. "Not 'til you answer my question."

He leaned back. "Which was?"

"Did you think he was the perfect person when you were together?"

"I don't think anyone's perfect." He rubbed his forehead with his fingers. "That's what gets you into trouble. You've learned I'm not perfect, right? You have learned that?" He blew out breath between his lips. "I love you. I plan on proving how much I love you."

"You have."

"Not enough, it seems."

"I was just talking stupid. I know you do."

"I don't want you to wonder, OK? You know...I'd feel the same."

"What do you mean?"

"If you had someone in your past like Michael."

"That makes me feel better." She turned to the window. "We're missing the sights."

His lips brushed against her neck. "You can tell me what I'm missing."

Sam took in the view as Alex got back to work.

Chapter 41

~ Displays ~

Sam's eyes beamed as they made their way down the same street Alex had occupied a few months earlier. Alex gripped her hand as he pointed.

"Right down here. Come on."

The door chimed open to new customers. Sam followed Alex into the store. There was an abundance of furniture of all purposes filling the small room. It wasn't long before the owner made her way from the back room. The black haired woman screeched, grabbing her chest.

"Alex? My God, I didn't recognize you." She ran over and hugged him.

"I'm starting to get used to these welcomes," he said to Sam. "How are you, Mira?"

"Wonderful, now that you're here. You wouldn't believe how worried Cil has made me."

"I can imagine."

She looked at him, holding his forearms tightly. "I feel honored. A second visit in two months. I wish it were under better circumstances."

Sam smiled, watching them banter. Alex had a similar affect on all of his mother's friends. There was an unmistakable bond, a maternal instinct that they all felt for him. It was comforting. She wondered if he sensed it.

"Mira." Alex motioned to Sam. "I'd like you to meet someone."

A look of recognition spread across Mira's face. "Sam."

"Yes."

"Samantha Dumas." A pair of arms flew about Sam and grasped her fiercely. "I'm sorry, you must think I'm the oddest woman." She released her grip. "It's just that...I've heard so much about you from Cil. She talks about you often. She's very proud of you." Mira smiled at Alex. "What are you two...? So, you are your mother's son after all. I've got a job and a room for the two of you if you need it."

"Thanks, Mira."

She waved her hand. "Are you hungry?"

"We ate on the train." Alex slyly smiled over to Sam.

"I have to offer you something anyway. Come into the kitchen. Ajit should be back in an hour. He's on a supply run for me."

"Sam's anxious to see him."

"He talks about you all the time."

"Really? He's doing alright then."

"Oh, he's fine. Very talented and a hard worker. He earned enough money to get himself his own apartment a few blocks from here."

"That's great. He's always wanted to be able to do that."

"Well, he's done it."

Alex excused himself from the table. "I'll be back, have to take care of some business. First door up the stairs?"

Mira nodded. "I still can't believe it. The two of you. I mean I always had a sense about Alex. Cil didn't seem interested in hearing my thoughts on the subject." Her lips left the cup. "She didn't want to believe he would have it any tougher than he already did."

"I don't understand."

"You're seeing the affects of it already. What you two are doing to be together hasn't been a picnic, I'm sure. She never wanted this for Alex. His interest in her work was a painful acceptance for her."

"You two seem very close."

"We were. Our contact has grown less over the years. But all of this with Alex has changed that. If she doesn't know about the two of you, you might want to hold off telling her."

"We've already decided to."

Just then the store's door rang.

"I'm not lucky enough for it to be a customer. That's probably Ajit."

Sam dashed into the room. Her eyes opened in amazement as she took him in. He was placing a few bags on the counter.

"Jit?"

He paused in mid-movement. Sam ran to him and grabbed his large frame, hugging him tightly. The huge hands covered her back. Her small face was cradled in his hands as he tilted it up. He examined her closely and tugged at the ends of her cropped hair. She laughed.

"You like it?"

He nodded. He released her and began signing.

"It's a long story."

His hands moved quickly.

"I heard. Mira told me. It's wonderful."

Alex walked into the store unnoticed. The expressions on each other's faces were relaxed and happy. He felt he would intrude if he said anything.

"I told you it's a long story."

How long will you be here?

"I don't know. I hope a while."

Alex crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe watching Sam sign.

You met Mira?

"Yes."

Someone came here a few months ago asking about you. Is that why you came?

"Sort of. Alex brought me here."

Jit nodded. *He's a good guy from what I could make of him.*

"Yeah. He's amazing."

Jit spotted him over Sam's shoulder. Alex gave him a friendly wave as Sam motioned for him to approach and Alex made his way to the both of them. He shook Jit's hand before standing in back of Sam, his hands around her waist. Ajit stared.

"I told you it was a long story."

Sam walked into the tiny bedroom and dressed for bed. Alex sat on the edge, coaxing the pants off of his feet. She admired his bare body before turning down the covers.

Alex glanced over his shoulder. "Some day."

"Yeah."

He joined her under the covers. She loved the feeling of his naked body pressed against the thin fabric of her nightgown. His body covered hers. He spoke in the dark.

"Mira says I can start working for her as soon as I want."

"That's good. I guess I'll have to find something too."

"You don't have to do anything."

"I'll go nuts if I don't, Alex."

"Maybe Mira can help us both out."

"I want to get involved in something to do with art. There seems to be so much around here."

His played with the ends of her hair. "Whatever it is, you know..."

"I know. Have to be subversive."

"You'll have to do things differently." Alex rubbed his forehead. "Talk to Mira in the morning, OK? Night."

"Good night, Alex."

The next morning Sam listened as Mira poured her second cup of coffee.

"I've seen your work through Cil. It's impressive. I have a friend who owns a small art store in the square. She's been talking about hiring an in-store refurbisher. They deal in second-hand, discarded merchandise mainly. It's quite a departure from the Verona Arts Preservation Society, though. I'll talk to her today and get a feel on the situation."

"I appreciate it."

Sam sat in the wrought iron chair amid the flowers in the tiny garden. Ever so often, Jit's figure passed by the workroom's dusty window. She caught glimpses of Alex as well, hard at work on his first day. There was no overwhelming look or disgust on his face. He was genuinely focused. That was a relief.

"Mom?" she whispered. "It's been a while since I needed to talk to you. Mom, for the first time, I'm happy. Alex is...well, you met him. We're going to do something impossible. We might even succeed. And I have you to thank for it. Thank you for knowing the time was right for me when even I didn't. Thank you for watching over me and loving me. I love you."

The back of her hand wiped away the tears as she leaned back feeling the warm rays of light on her face. Everything felt right.

Alex polished the mahogany chair to a reflective sheen. "I never realized how good I was with my hands."

Sam bent forward, stifling a laugh. Alex's looked over at her. A familiar sounds escaped from the

corner of the room. She turned to find Ajit laughing at the both of them. Sam signed to him, a rosy blush pulsing under her cheeks. Soft lips brushed her cheek. Turning back, she caught Alex's lips with her own.

"You knew what I meant." He grinned at her. "You'll be fine today."

"I hope so."

"Don't be nervous. Relax and be yourself."

Ajit clapped to get Alex's attention. A quick sign and he was out of the workshop.

"How much have you gotten done this week?"

"Mira says she'll be able to fill up her orders twice as quickly with me around."

"That's great."

It was noon and a base of slick sweat covered his face, neck, and arms. Sam grabbed a washcloth, wetting it in the sink. She came back to him, wiping his forehead and cheeks. Alex talked as she cleaned his face.

"She wants you there at one this afternoon? You'll be fine. It should be easy compared to what you used to do. You don't have to work, Sam. I told you. I'll take care of you even if I have to get three jobs. We can make it."

"I don't want you killing yourself. Besides, if you worked three jobs I'd never see you. That wasn't the point of us getting away, was it?"

"No, I guess not."

"I don't want us living above this store forever. We need our own place."

He smiled. "That sounds nice. I've never really had my own place."

"Once we talk to Cil, once it's official...and she knows...I want to make arrangements."

"For what?"

"I'm going to sell the house."

Alex's mouth fell open. "Sam, no."

"I won't need it anymore. I'm not planning on going back."

"But it's your mother's house."

"It was my mother's house. It's mine now."

Alex shook his head. "You can't."

"We can use the money to buy a small apartment here. Something that'll be ours. If we're going to be together there's no reason for me to keep it. We'll never be able to live there, Alex. I don't want to be sensible." She stroked his cheek. "We can talk about it when the time comes."

She tossed the cloth in the sink and headed for the door. Ajit made his way back in with an ancient end table. Excusing herself she looked at Alex once more.

"I won't change my mind, though."

Sam was put to work immediately rummaging in a tiny closet. She searched for the supplies. Everything was readily available for any needs she may have.

"I'd do it myself, but I don't have the time anymore." Liselle gave her a short overview of the store and its operation. "A recommendation by Mira was all I needed to hire you."

Walking out of the storage closet to her first assignment, brushes and knife in hand, Sam glanced at the rows and rows of paintings stacked against the back wall.

"I certainly won't be bored."

The faded oils stared back at her against the canvas. Muted colors formed the portrait of woman serenely laying her bare body atop a divan. A large part had been scorched and destroyed. It was a beautiful composition. Sam might be able to do something with it. As she always did before touching an assignment for the first time, she took a deep breath and studied the lines for a long time. Soon the sounds of the knife were heard scraping on the canvas.

She allowed her mind to fill with thoughts of the person responsible for the piece of artwork she was reconstructing. All of the blackness and charred disrepair was taken away. She applied the base coat, testing it against the neutral color of the canvas. It was not long before the strokes, abruptly singed and seared by flames, were whole. Sam had a gift for blending colors and matching them perfectly. Her strokes continued the original ones made by a brush engulfed long ago by heat and smoke. The lines and effects they made were examined. Sam mimicked the hand movements that had created the image. She was lost in the painter's mind and enjoyed her stay.

"Did you plan on coming home tonight?"

Alex's voice startled her. Liselle was smiling in the doorway. Sam glanced at her watch.

"I didn't want to bother her, she looked so involved with it," Liselle said.

Alex nodded. "Mira said I should come over and check."

Liselle's eyes widened and she smiled. "Wonderful. My God, you've almost finished it?"

Sam grabbed the paints and brushes and went to the sink. Alex walked across the stained wood floor to admire her work. Sam caught his expression out of the corner of her eye as he squinted at the paint.

"Nice job, Sam. I'm going to get the store ready for closing. Five minutes enough time for you to finish up?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Alright. I'll meet you out front." Liselle walked out of the back room.

The brushes were dried and placed in their appropriate places. She headed for the closet. Alex sat on the stool in front of the painting, swiveling.

"How'd you learn to do this?" he called to her, as she placed the paints on the shelf.

"Went to school in Verona."

"Could you do it before?"

"What do you mean?"

"Before you went to school for it could you paint?"

"Well, I knew it was something I had in me. I drew constantly as a kid. Going to school refined my technique. Made me better. Why do you ask?"

He shook his head. "I always wanted to try."

She looked at him. "Cil never taught you?"

"I never asked. Besides, it was obvious she didn't want me involved in any of this."

"Why?"

They both looked at the painting. Sam rested her hands on his shoulders.

"You would be here all night working on this if you could."

"Probably. I tend to lose track of time. I used to do it all the time in Verona." Her lips went to his cheek. "I can show you if you like."

"What?"

"How to paint."

He turned to her with interest. "Yeah? What if I don't have any talent for it?"

"You won't know unless you try. Besides, you said how good you were with your hands."

He grabbed her hands with his. "I did say that. You think you could teach me?"

"We'll start this weekend. Come on, my new boss is probably waiting." She led him by the hand out of the room.

Chapter 42

~ Attempts ~

—
"That's what I'm going to paint?" The questioning stare from Alex peered from the side of the easel.

"It's an apple."

"Yes, it is. Its called still life."

"It doesn't seem very interesting."

"It's not suppose to be. You're going to learn about sketching, light, composition...lots of fun stuff before you actually work with paint."

He twirled the pencil in his hand. "Is that why I have this instead of a brush and canvas?"

"Also because oil painting is expensive. I don't want to ask Liselle about taking any supplies home yet. You have to start at the beginning. You can't jump to the end. Your goal is to make this apple interesting."

A patient grin surfaced. "Alright...teach me."

After several hours and dozens of papers an image emerged on Alex's sketchpad that resembled the form in front of him. The exercise was incredibly frustrating. His determination and perfectionism made it that much more intense. He willed himself to succeed. Even if it was just to finish. Sam picking up the discarded sheets.

"Congratulations. You did a great job on the shadowing."

"Yeah?" Alex grinned hesitantly.

"Yeah. You really grabbed on to the three-dimensional aspect."

"It's amazing what a person can do with a pencil." He ran his charcoal tipped fingers through his hair.

"You should wash those. You'll blend that charcoal into your hair like you did on the paper."

He jumped off the stool, heading for the sink. "Thanks, Sam."

"No problem. I enjoyed it. Now you have to do some sketches on your own and then you'll be ready for another lesson."

"I really liked it."

"I could tell by all those grunts and groans. The paper ripping was another sign." She leaned on his shoulder as he scrubbed his fingertips.

"Well, I did. No matter what you saw. I never thought I could do that."

"I'm glad you finally got the chance to try."

"Because of you."

Her cheek pressed against his. "Want to get something to eat?"

"Sounds good." He dried his hands with the washcloth and followed her out.

"We sold another one." Liselle placed Sam's commission in her hand.

"Great." She rifled through the bills before shoving them into her pocket.

"As soon as you finish one it seems to leave as quickly. You need to slow down, though. I'm going to run out of work for you."

"Not by the looks of your storage room." Sam settled in behind the sales counter.

"Oh." Liselle turned to her. "Alex stopped in and left you an envelope. He didn't want to bother you, just asked that you look at it during your break. It's in the top drawer."

Curious, Sam opened the drawer and pulled out a large manila envelope. She laid it on the counter, tearing at the sealed seam. She grabbed the edges and pulled out the papers. Sam fanned them out. A small note read, 'My attempts. Be gentle. Alex.'

She studied the sketches. Still life sketches. She was glad he hadn't tried anything too difficult. Sam recognized many of the objects: cups, glasses, vases, and furniture. The amount of work was considerable. Looking at the dates, she realized he had sketched one a day for the past two weeks, sometimes as many as three. She had caught him sketching on a occasion, but he would close the pad. He was intent on waiting to show her when he was ready. They were good. His style became more assured on the last group of drawings. He'd found his method. The pencil strokes were longer, determined, and full of ease. It had clicked somewhere as it always does for someone who has the innate talent. Her eyes fell on the last sketch fondly. It was her mother's locket, positioned artfully on the oak table in the kitchen. She traced the penciled chain with the tip of her finger careful not to disturb the charcoal. The door chimed and she looked up at Alex. He was smiling warily, glancing at the drawings.

"Hi."

"You looked at them? What do you think?"

Sam waited a few beats. "I think you are on your way to becoming a gifted artist."

He laughed. "No, really."

"Really."

He leaned against the counter. "Seriously, you're not saying that to prevent an ego bruising?"

Sam shook her head. "I think they're good. When did you find the time to do them all?"

"Usually in the morning or late at night while you're sleeping. During lunch. It was weird."

"What?"

"My fingers would start to itch." They both laughed. "Have you ever felt that?"

"Yeah, it's your creative energy wanting a release. I get that way, too."

"I thought there was something wrong with me."

"My mom use to get like that, too."

His fingers went over his sketches. "When do I get my next lesson?"

"I think we should try in a few more weeks. You should do more 'til then."

"Why?"

"Because, you're starting to form your style. I don't want to stop you from figuring that out before I show you how I work."

"Oh. I didn't know I was doing that."

"In the meantime, sketch until the itch is gone."

"Might be a while."

He leaned in, kissing her. Sam stroked his face. She played with the locks of his hair that fell against his cheek. The blond strands had returned when he washed the remaining dye out the previous night.

"Did Mira tell you?"

"What?"

"She and Jit are going to Rome Friday. Furniture hunting." He grinned. "She's closing the shop for the day. We'll have the house to ourselves."

"Oh." Sam grinned in return.

"I hate having to be so quiet. Especially when you do that thing."

"What thing?"

He brought his lips to her ear. "When you take me in your mouth." His lips went back to hers. "I want you to make me scream on Friday. I'll see you tonight."

Sam blushed and giggled. "OK."

Alex searched the shelves of the refrigerator, moving a few jars. His naked body, except for boxers, shivered as the cold air escaped. Sam was still upstairs in bed. He'd offered to come to the kitchen for some sustenance, hoping to continue their activities. He pulled out some cured meats, cheese, and leftover pasta. Checking the clock, he estimated they had a few more hours before Mira got home. They'd be gone by then. Alex had taken her out to dinner and bought tickets for an English play opening in the small Certo Theater. It was a night out for the both of them. Something they hadn't had for a while. His bare feet made a soft scuffling against the wood as it creaked beneath his steps. He kicked the door open and brought the tray to the bed.

"Thanks."

She tugged at the shirt she had put on and began to pick at the food. Alex nodded, eating quietly beside her. It was comfortable, relaxed, the complete opposite from the sounds that had filled the room for the majority of the day. Sam was the first to break it, giggling as she chewed. Alex grinned at her and leaned against the headboard.

It was the sound of the store's front door closing that woke him up. He felt nervous in his stomach. He couldn't explain why he was so excited about the day. For some reason, it all felt new. Sam was sleeping beside him, spread out under the white cotton sheet. His body moved over hers trying not to wake her. Not yet. The physical excitement had risen with him. He brushed over her thigh. Sam moved slightly and buried her cheek into the pillow. He was glad she had gotten use to his anxious sleeping habits. His restlessness in deep sleeps would lead to sheets scattered everywhere, pillows under legs, and Alex waking on the floor a few times. Sam sometimes woke him to find he had managed to make his way on top of her. Other times she would spend those nights awake, not wanting to disturb him.

Sliding his legs between hers, they parted willingly. He smiled and watched her rhythmic breathing. Her head began to turn and he realized she was waking. Her eyes blinked open.

"Alex?" she whispered.

Her mouth opened, yawning. It was when she arched her back to stretch that he entered her.

"How come you never woke me up like that before?" Sam bit into the cheese, and turned to him.

Alex shrugged. "I can from now on."

Sam laughed. "Maybe not every morning. I'd never want to get out of bed."

Sam felt him on her as she woke. She blinked and saw Alex above her. She murmured his name and yawned. The feeling of him pushing inside woke her completely. She gasped and her eyes flashed open.

"Morning," he whispered, rocking into her.

Caught off guard, Sam could only moan. He laughed and moved in a pleasurable rhythm. Her hands went under his arms, finding his back and traveling down his body. The sheet came down with them, exposing his bottom, which she gripped with her palms. He moaned as she pushed him into her further.

The waitress returned to their corner table with a bottle of red wine and set it down next to him. Sam inspected the label.

"Alex?"

"Sh." He brought the rim of the open bottle to her glass and poured. "I don't want you to worry about how expensive anything is tonight."

She sat quietly as he finished filling her glass. Sam caught the looks of admiration and interest fall in his direction and smiled. He looked even more stunning than usual; a fact Sam had come to believe could not be possible. He had dressed for the evening. It was a simple blue suit, but Alex wore it like a second skin. The color agreed with his eyes under the light, a perfect combination. Though he had tried to comb his hair back, a few stubborn strands made their way over his forehead to hang in front of his face. He brought his glass up waiting for hers. They chimed together and they both sipped.

Alex licked the wine coating his lips. "I think you'll like what I've got planned for the rest of the evening."

They walked down the street to the store, Sam doing most of the talking. With animated hand expressions she was going over the parts of the play she had enjoyed the most.

"Thanks for this, Alex."

"I'm glad you had a nice time."

"This was actually like a date. Like the ones I've seen in movies."

He smirked. "Do I get to kiss you goodnight?"

"Let me see if Mira's waiting up for me first." She peeked into the store window. "Lights are off. I guess it's OK."

She pulled him to her by the back of his neck and kissed his lips. He pushed her against the doorframe, leaning into her. They broke the kiss, both out of breath.

"Can I come up?"

"You'll have to be quiet. No screaming," she grinned, "like this afternoon."

Mira walked into the workshop, motioning to Jit. Alex looked over as he worked on the piece in front of him.

"I've got some news." Mira sat down on the stool next to Alex. "I talked to Cil today."

Jit and Alex both stopped simultaneously.

"Did you tell her I was here?"

"Just like you asked. She was in shock at first, then relieved you were alright. She's going to get things in order and make it here in a few weeks."

"Is she being careful?"

"She's doing the best she can. You have no idea when it comes to Vinto."

Alex watched as she drifted off in thought. Through pieced together bits of information Alex had guessed something happened to Mira 12 years ago with Vinto. He suspected it was similar to what was occurring with Cil. The look on her face was unsettling.

"What about Sam? You didn't say anything, did you?"

"No, and I don't think she suspects."

"I still don't know how to tell her."

"You'll figure it out." Mira stroked his hair and made her way out of the workshop.

The green meadow reflected patches of harsh, noonday sunlight. Sam leaned back against the tree trunk, watching Alex as he sketched alongside her. Her eyes trailed over his fingers as they led the pencil, forming strokes. She shook her head.

"You're getting better than me and I've been doing it forever."

Alex smiled. "I have a great teacher."

"No, you have a great talent."

When the sketch was finished, Sam took the pad and compared it to the scene in front of her. Alex stood up and stretched, shaking his hands. She closed the pad.

"Very nice." Sam patted the grass next to her and Alex sat down.

"I think I'm going to stick with pencil sketching, leave the oils to you."

"Why?"

"I like this. The basics of it. Oil painting seems incredibly complicated."

"It's up to you. I can always show you if you change your mind."

"I'd rather watch you."

Alex had spent a few hours the past weeks with Sam at her job, sitting behind her, watching her work. He wanted to see how she recreated the artwork that Liselle was selling. Ever since Mira had told him about her talk with Cil he had spent as much time as possible with Sam. He would walk her to work, take breaks with her, and meet her outside the store to walk her home. The thought of asking her to quit her job occurred frequently. It was too long to be separated from her, those few hours. There were times lately when he didn't even want to share her with Mira and Jit. His amorous behavior had increased as well; leaving both of them sleep deprived many mornings. Sam didn't seem to notice the change, or if she had, didn't appear to mind. There was an urgency in his actions. He wanted to fit everything in, worrying that Cil would find something wrong with what he had done with Sam. It was ridiculous, his rational side told him. But there was still something gnawing at him. It told him he would have to do whatever was necessary to keep Sam with him.

Sam was oblivious to his worries. He did a good job of concealing them. She was looking forward to seeing Cil, anxious to tell her of the life she and Alex were creating together.

"I'm going to show you how to sketch a portrait next. I think you're ready for it."

Alex nodded. "Me too. Are we going to start right now?"

"I wasn't planning on it."

"Good."

He leaned into her on the soft grass, his kisses trying to consume the very essence of her.

Chapter 43

~ Apprehensions ~

—

"I still don't like it."

"Sam, it's better this way, trust me."

Alex was dressing as Sam watched, still in bed. He was to meet Ajit at the train station at 9:00. It was around 8:00 as he finished preparing for the trip to Rome.

Alex explained, "Cil's right. There's always the chance that Vinto is still suspicious. You remember what Mira said?"

"Yes. Rome is a huge city and it's a lot easier to make yourself lost in a hurry." She dictated the sentence she had heard repeated the past week. "I still don't want you to go by yourself."

"Ajit's coming with me."

"That's not any better. I'll be worrying about the both of you. I want to come."

"No." Alex shook his head.

"I know you don't want me to see her yet. But I want to come with you. I'll wait for you somewhere. I could stay at our hotel." She smiled, remembering those days in Rome.

Alex sighed. "Then I'll worry about you. Don't you see, either way, one of us has to worry about the other."

"Why does it have to be me that worries?"

"Because the one who's worrying is the safest."

Sam shook her head, her eyes beginning to tear. Alex sat next to her, holding her. She buried her head against his neck. Alex's heart began to ache.

"I'm afraid you won't come back."

Her sobs were muffled by his shirt. He rubbed her back. He wanted to tell her he'd come back, but he couldn't speak them. Even he couldn't be sure. She kissed his neck.

"Don't go."

"Oh, Sam, please."

Her lips came to his. She kissed him as the sobbing mingled with his pleas. The lips moved to his ear. He heard her whisper.

"Make love to me."

The tears began to build in him and he fought them back and did what was asked.

Alex sat across from Ajit as the ground passed by them. His thoughts went back to Sam and how they had made love. Her eyes had not left his face the entire time. She had kissed him tenderly, like a breeze across his lips. The fingers traced every inch of him as he had pulsed inside her. He had held back his moans as she responded to him. When he came, tears reappeared traveling down the side of her face as she finally closed her eyes. They had whispered words of love before he left. She didn't want to see him leave and said goodbye at the bedroom door. As the door closed he turned back,

listening for a few seconds. Waiting for the sound of sobbing to return, but there was nothing. He pictured her leaning against the door, her hands covering her face.

Ajit's signing jolted him out of his memory. "What?"

We're here. He motioned to the station bustling with people.

Sam sat in front of the canvas listening to the tick of the clock as it signaled the passing of each second with excruciating slowness. The brush rested in her fingers, the crimson beginning to cake on its sable bristles. She didn't see Liselle approach.

"How's it coming?"

She jumped in the stool. "Huh?"

"Sorry. Did I disturb your concentration?"

"No. It's not going as easy as I would hope."

"It's a complicated piece. Let me know when you need a break."

Liselle left Sam alone with her assignment and her thoughts. The colors swirled around the canvas, scattering in circles and strokes. Sam placed the brush on the easel and rubbed her temple with the stained tips of her fingers. The painting returned to normal. She shook her head. *Please, let me make it through these next two days without going crazy.*

Alex read over the note Mira had left with explicit instructions from Cil. They were to meet in the Plaza by the Trevi Fountain. It was always filled with tourists, vendors, and plenty of police. The safest place to meet. Cil had a few friends who would monitor the scene, make sure there was an open window for a quick getaway if necessary. Mira called them outlaws, like herself.

He stuffed it back into his pocket and leaned against the headboard. Ajit slept next to him. Alex stared at the clock: 2:00. *Shit, another three hours to go.* He rubbed his head. His feet began to twitch. The tender flesh on the side of his mouth was already raw from being chewed. He couldn't risk going out by himself. There wasn't much to do in the small room but wait. Alex made his way to the chair in the corner of the room. He bit his lips and stared at the floor. The veins in the marble floor brought back the memory of he and Sam in the hotel a few blocks away. Slipping off his shoes, he pulled his socks off and felt the cold marble beneath his toes. He leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes. He recalled the feel of her lips against his that first time. He sighed and sat up. Ajit was still asleep. He searched through his bag and pulled out his sketchpad and pencil, tapping it against the paper. It took a minute before he began drawing. Two hours later Alex smiled.

She'll like it.

It was a good first attempt at a portrait. The activity had given him time to think. After he met Cil he would leave on the first train back to Padua. It left at 11:00. He wanted to catch the one at 9:00. Cil would have to be satisfied with a short visit. The only other thought was getting back home to Sam.

"Ajit." He called his name twice before he stirred. "Gotta get ready."

Alex drank the soda, surveying the square. It was nearing 5:30.

Late, as usual, Ajit signed.

"Yeah, that's Cil. We'll give her 'til six. At least I got to do a bit of shopping while we wait." Alex tapped the bag next to him.

Sam will like that.

"She was looking at one the last time we were here. Promised I'd buy her one sooner or later. Might as well be now."

They sat on the edge of the fountain. Minutes later, a boy of four walked over to them. He had blond curls and blue eyes. The boy tugged at Alex's pant leg.

"You lost?"

The boy shook his head. Alex waited for him to speak. He didn't. Sighing, he looked around.

"Wonder who he belongs to?"

Before Ajit could answer, the boy began signing. *My Mom.*

Alex's mouth dropped open. His face turned sour as he looked over to Ajit and saw the pained expression on his face. Ajit signed first.

Where's your mom?

The boy pointed to the cluster of café tables. Alex noticed the young woman sitting at one of the outer ones, watching them. She signed over to them.

Sorry. He wanted to say hello. First people he's seen sign since we got here.

Alex smiled at her.

Do you have a penny?

Ajit nodded and searched his pockets. He pulled out a bunch of coins. The boy picked out one and threw it into the fountain.

Mommy says that if you do that you'll come back here.

He waved to them and ran back over to his mother. Ajit and Alex both waved at the woman as she picked up her son, placing him on her lap. Ajit stared at the mother for a few seconds.

"Go over there and introduce yourself. Don't see Daddy." Alex arched his eyebrows. "What'll it hurt? I'm going to get another soda. I'll come and get you when Cil gets here."

Alex tossed the empty cup in a trashcan. He returned to Ajit, grabbed his bag, and tucked it under his arm. He rifled through his pocket and pulled out a penny, tossing it into the water.

"Couldn't hurt."

Alex left Ajit by the fountain, turning once more to see him still contemplating his next move.

The store's front door chimed pleasantly. Sam plopped her bag on the counter and peered up at the clock. Her late night at work had been an excuse to stay away from the house. The distant sound of the phone rang in her ears as she closed her eyes, exhausted from worrying, but she would not sleep until Alex was home. *Home.* Surprised she had dozed off, Sam awoke to Mira shaking her arm. She gazed at her with heavy lids. It took some time for the expression of fear on Mira's face to register in Sam's mind. She blinked her eyes open.

"What is it?" Her stomach began to turn over.

"That was Cil. Alex is gone."

Sam looked around. "What do you mean gone?"

"When she got to the meeting place Ajit was the only one there. He went looking for him back to the hotel. He's gone."

"His stuff...if his stuff was gone he probably changed his mind and decided to come back."

Mira shook her head. "His stuff was still in the room."

"But, he can't be..."

Sam bit the inside of her mouth, breaking the flesh and awakening her senses.

"Cil's got everyone she knows on the lookout for him in Rome. He might have gotten scared, had a gut feeling about something and went someplace safe."

Sam nodded. It was a probability. A slim one. Deep down, however, she knew he would not have left Ajit alone in a dangerous position if he could help it.

"How long since anyone's seen him?"

"Six o'clock."

It was approaching 11:00. Her heart sank. She made her way up to their bedroom. Her eyes became heavy. At one point, she felt herself miss a step and grabbed for the wall. The shin of her leg caught the corner of the step and jolted her eyes open. She muttered profanities and fell against the wall in a sunken heap. Mira's small hands helped her up, leading her to the room. Sam thought the cries rattling in her ears were echoes of her own until she realized they were coming from Mira as well. Somehow she managed to get Sam on the bed. Sam curled up against the rumpled sheets burying her face in her hands. Mira sat on the edge of the bed stroking her back.

"Leave."

The request was tortured between cries and Mira consented. The door shut and Sam whimpered into the pillow. Her sobs stopped as she smelled him. She brought the sheets around her, breathing him, covering her with him. The sheets and pillow were still wet with fresh tears at daybreak. The door creaked open and Sam jerked her head up. His backpack entered first and Sam's heart leapt.

"Alex?"

She jumped off the bed. Ajit's sullen face peeked in before the rest of him. Her look of disappointment replaced the eagerness.

I'm sorry, Sam.

She grabbed Alex's backpack and sat on the bed. Her head fell into it and she sniffed the fabric. Sam caught Ajit's hand motions from the side.

It's my fault.

"No, it's not."

Yeah. I let him go off by himself. It was just in the square. He was so relaxed after the boy talked to us I guess he didn't realize it either.

Sam cut him off. "It doesn't matter. I don't feel like talking. I want to be alone."

Ajit brought his hands up. *Cil's going to let us know...*

"I don't care!"

Ajit moved back, looking hurt, and left the room. She hugged the backpack tightly, rocking back and forth. It could have been minutes or hours before Sam stopped and opened the bag. A smile crept to her lips as she pulled out his clothes: first a T-shirt, then his boxers, and an extra pair of pants. She brought out the sketchpad and laid it atop the backpack on her lap. The pages floated past her eyes until they stopped at the last sketch, one she hadn't seen before. She sighed, then bit her lip. He'd

sketched her.

How many times did he watch me sleep? To be able to draw it from memory.

By the shadowing on her face the sketch was set around sunrise. Her hands were buried beneath the pillow, propping her head up at an angle. Her hair brushed against her cheek, covering most of it. A closed eyelid could be made out under the wild strands framing her face. Sam's eyes traveled the contours of the folds and creases that made up the sheet covering her body. The figure slept on her stomach. The sketch faded out a bit past the waist. Underneath was Alex's scrawled signature. She traced over the strokes, tears dampening the outer lines in circular pools. She blotted the spots of paper with the sheet and wiped her eyes.

"No. I'm not giving in that easily."

The sketchpad was closed and placed in the drawer. Calm thoughts entered her mind. *Have to get in touch with every one I can to find out anything. Cil? I'll have to tell her. Bitterness was in her mouth at the very thought of her. Mira... I could call Aggie. She might be able to find out something about Vinto for me. I'll have to tell her, too. She sighed. It has to be done. Maybe Joanne can find out if Sid's heard anything.* It was a start. She wondered what they would do to him if Vinto was responsible for the disappearance. Alex's voice filled her head.

They can do whatever they want, Sam. It won't matter what either of us says. Besides, me being caught with you is an afterthought. They're after me for a different reason altogether. It will just be a bonus with you.

Sam found her notebook and began sending out as many distress signals as possible. A covert operation was no longer an option. Not if she wanted to find Alex.

Chapter 44

~ Contacts ~

—
The news trickled in at a lethargic pace. Sam had contacted Aggie, but didn't let her know everything. Her need to find out the current state of Vinto's investigation could be hidden by a veil of worry for Cil. Aggie did interrogate her about why she was in Italy.

"I understand the need to get away, dear. It's been very stressful for Cil and I'm sure it's taken a toll on you, but are you planning on returning within the next decade?" There was an expression of distress on Aggie's haggard face.

"Things are complicated."

"I've had to give most of your assignments to others. They couldn't wait for you."

"I figured you would." She sighed.

"When can I expect you back? You have a responsibility to the Society." Her tone grew manipulative. "What would your mother say about all of this?"

"My mother would understand," Sam stated flatly.

"I'm not so sure."

"Well, I am."

Aggie waved her hand. "I can give you another week and then I expect you back in Verona."

Sam shook her head. "I can't be back in a week."

The glasses were taken off her face with two shaking fingers. Aggie's ticks were becoming more frequent, the tremors almost constant.

"You know what that means."

"Yes." Sam nodded. "You'll have my resignation by the end of the week. Just find out what you can for me. I'll talk to you Friday."

Sam ended the connection with a push of a button. Cat's e-mail was received like clockwork during the middle of the week, upbeat and jovial as usual. Her tour was ending next week. She would be back in Verona.

I can't wait to fill you in on everything. You will be back soon, right? Please tell me you've gotten all of this traveling business out of your system. What's with you anyway? It used to be an event to get you to come with me to a movie. Nobody can even find you anymore. I'm the free spirited one. remember?

It was hard to keep lying to Cat. With Alex gone she ached to let Cat know everything. The need to talk to her was unbearable. She muffled the need with a few keystrokes, hiding the pain and leaving Cat unburdened. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in." Sam finished the note and sent it off to Cat.

"Sam?" Cil's voice filled the room tentatively.

Sam looked up from the monitor. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see Mira. I...I wanted to get some of Alex's things. She told me they'd be in this room. What are you doing here?"

"I decided not to go to work today."

"What?"

"I've been finding out what happened to Alex."

"What are you doing in Europe...in this room?"

"I told you what I was doing."

The connection hit her like a train. Gasping, Cil looked as if she'd been kicked in the stomach.

"You've been with him...all this time? Have you?" Blood surfaced beneath Cil's cheeks.

"Yes."

"I don't believe this...all this time. You knew what I was going through and you didn't say a thing. The both of you...what have you been doing together?"

A look of hurt washed over Sam's face. She stared down at the keys, feeling guilty, and not knowing why.

"Answer me, Sam. What have you been doing with him here?"

"I...made a decision. We both made a decision. We wanted to be together. He came to Verona to be with me."

Cil shook her head. "He came to Vegas that night to find out about you. He put himself in the worst position possible for an op in order to get that information. And you let him bury himself by continuing with," she waved her hands in disgust, "this."

"I did? He knew the risk and took it. And so did I. We were willing to take the chance together."

The rage on Cil's face was barely controlled. "So it could all come to this? Now that you've had your fun."

"Shut up, Cil! None of this would have happened if it weren't for you coming into our life and destroying it! Or if you hadn't convinced me to come to Morrah. Alex would've been better off never having met me. You kept drilling that into my head, over and over. What I wanted. What I needed. Well, I finally found it! I thought you'd be congratulating me. I did what you and mother wanted. I made my choice and I'm willing to deal with the consequences. Are you?"

Cil let the barrage of words sink into her skin. Sam fell back against the bed in a heap. Mira made her way into the room.

"Cil, what are you doing?" She picked Sam up, letting her lean on her shoulder.

"Why didn't you tell me she was here with him?"

"Because I knew how you'd react. I'm sorry, Sam." She stroked her hair. "I thought she went to work. I didn't mean for you two to stumble onto each other like this. What are you doing to her? Do you think she needs this? Do you? You've never seen them together, have you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You've never seen how much they care for each other. You would have been proud of both of them. Everything you used to talk about, what it should be like. They have that...like you and Ryan did."

Cil looked at her in disbelief. "It doesn't matter. They'll never..."

Sam stared up at her. "What?"

"Vinto has him."

"He's alive?"

Cil nodded. "That's really not a consolation, Sam."

"I know, but he's alive." Sam breathed out heavily.

"It'll take another day or so to find out exactly where. There'll be some litigation and procedures before they take him back."

Sam looked at the floor. "They'll make an example out of him."

"Yes, they will."

Cil stared around the room. "I may be able to see him before they return him to the States. I want to bring some of his stuff in case he's allowed a few personal items."

Sam nodded. "I want to go."

"No!" Cil bit the air. "There is no way you can see him. They can't know about this. It would make Alex's situation worse."

"Cil's right." Mira caressed Sam's back. "They would accuse him of corruption and kidnapping along with the assault. Just like..." Mira's mouth snapped shut.

Sam watched Cil's face filled with sadness and rage.

"Ryan?" croaked out of Sam's mouth.

Her elbows rested on her thighs as her palms cradled her face. *They killed him.* She turned to Mira.

"Does he know his father was killed by them?"

"Vinto isn't responsible for Ryan. Not directly. He worked for them, like Alex." Cil occupied the chair next to Alex's bag. "That's how I met him. It was at an opening on my 20th birthday. Your mother and I managed to get an invitation. She got it for me as a present, actually. It was a very formal event, nothing like we have now. It was awkward talking to him in sign language. He could tell I was new. He took his time with me. Everything we did was in secret. He had to disappear from existence to be with me. We weren't careful enough, though, because we got caught. He was accused of the exact things Mira said and was taken into custody. But without my agreeing to the charges, he was let go. That wouldn't happen today. So many things have changed in a short amount of time.

"We lived together, scraping by, before I finished school and got hired on the legitimate side of Vinto's business and made my way here. Ryan gave up everything for me. Alex came along three months after you were born. That was when he started telling me it was time. I kept promising him I'd get out of the business. That we'd get away together as a family. Do what he wanted; travel the way he had before we'd met. But I knew it would be impossible for us no matter where we went. Even Europe has its limits, especially where money is concerned. Taking care of three people would've been hard. I wanted to wait until I'd made enough contacts to assist us, give us a way to survive comfortably." Cil paused. "The truth is I was scared, for the first time in a long time. I liked my life and I didn't want to change things. Ryan started making plans to find us a way out. He headed to Canada to find a place for us where we could escape. We even took Alex once when he was four."

Sam's eyes closed, knowing it was Williams Lake she was reminiscing about.

"But I couldn't do it." Her head fell, eyes closed in shame. "As much as I complained about the way

things were I couldn't let go of it. That's when he realized I didn't love him enough and he left. I couldn't tell Alex the truth. Ryan told him he was going on an adventure and would bring him back souvenirs and stories. He wanted to go, of course, but Ryan convinced him it was a top secret mission. He loved him so much he believed anything that came out of his mouth. Two months later, I received word that he'd been mugged. A group of men had robbed him in Europe. Instead of giving in, he fought them and was killed."

For the first time in her life, Sam saw Cil cry. It was painful to watch. A moan that sounded like a dying animal expelled from her mouth. Sam grated at the sound. Tears burst like a flood that had been held back for years straining against an obstruction as it built momentum. It took only seconds to push them back and regain her composure.

"I couldn't let him know I was the reason his father was dead, my stubborn sensibility and selfishness to blame. I told him he'd been found by the government, that there was no chance he would get out alive. Even at six, though, I think he knew I wasn't telling him all of it. But he never really pushed when it came to me."

"I love him enough, Cil."

An image of Alex, that day in the cabin before they left, entered Sam's mind. He had affirmed the same statement she had made by the fire. Tears ran down her cheeks as her eyelids released them. Cil raised her eyes.

"I won't try to see him yet. If it will help him." Sam laughed inappropriately. "I can wait 'til he gets back to the States. Maybe I'll be able to do something for him there. The tape! The tape of the incident...I have the copy of it. The one Vinto didn't have a chance to edit. It shows the whole thing. That has to be worth something."

A small glint of hope crossed Cil's face. "I doubt it."

"We won't know until we try." Sam stood up. "As soon as I know Alex is back, I'll go to Verona and get the tape." She smiled for the first time since Alex had left. "I have to go tell Liselle I'll be leaving."

Sam hurried out, leaving Mira and Cil alone in the bedroom. She stopped at the bottom of the steps, listening behind her.

"It won't work," Cil said.

"You don't know that. At the very least, it might spare his life."

"Does she even realize how close he is to being killed?"

"I'm sure she does. But she'll do everything she can to stop that from happening. Even if it means risking her own life."

"No, I won't let her do that. I'd die if something happened to her."

Cries were heard again. It didn't sound as if Mira were doing anything to comfort her. Sam did not hear the creak of the bedsprings.

"Sarah and I did so much to protect her from this."

"You have to tell her, Cil."

The crying stopped. "No."

"She needs to know."

"There's no way I can tell her...not now. What about Alex?"

"He needs to know, too."

"No. I can't do that."

Mira sighed. "The rest of his things should be in the dresser. I don't think you should be here when Sam gets back. She's had enough for one day. Let me know when you've found out more about Alex. I'll tell her."

Sam moved quickly, grabbing her bag as she went out the back. Her thoughts turned to the heated discussion between Mira and Cil when she had left the room. It was dismissed as she began to plan. She could not bother with trivial details; especially not anything that didn't directly involve Alex. Blood began to pound in her ears when Cil mentioned the real threat of Alex being killed.

Can't let that happen. I won't be responsible for that happening to him.

Sam returned to the house late into the night. Ajit was waiting for her in the store. She tried to smile to ease his worry.

Where've you been?

"I had to get out of here. Is Cil gone? Did she say anything to you?"

Not much.

"Well, I'm tired. Going to bed."

His arm grabbed her wrist. *You're leaving soon, aren't you?* He signed with one hand.

"Yes."

He let go of her. *We're going to worry about you. You don't have to go.*

"Yeah, I do."

Bending down, he kissed her cheek. *I can go with you.*

Sam's smile was warm. "No, you have to stay here. You've done enough for us. It's time to take care of yourself."

Sam... I... you know there's the chance that Alex...

She closed her hands over his. "That's not the chance I want to concentrate on."

The steps were longer up to the bedroom. They seemed to grow in their length every day since Alex had gone. It was the dread of opening the door to an empty room. It was as she had left it. There wasn't much to take. Her fingers grasped the dresser handles and pulled the drawer open. Most of his clothes were gone. Cil had left a few shirts, a pair of pants. There was also his tattered pair of boxers in a wrinkled heap between the clothes. Cil had tossed them aside, not realizing they were his favorite pair. She smiled, thankful. She wanted to take as much of him back with her as she could.

It took her a minute before she realized his bag had been taken. On the bed was his sketchpad and pencils. She sighed. They would certainly not allow him a sharp object like a pencil. The absurd vision of Alex choke-holding a guard with a pencil pushed against her neck flashed through her mind. She shook her head. *I can at least give him the sketchbook when I see him.* The thought was matter of fact. She was sure of it. *When I see him again.*

Chapter 45

~ Visit ~

Cil sat in the sanitized waiting room. The harsh white of the walls began to affect her eyes. She closed them for minutes, waiting for him. The sound of the door opened her eyes. Her mouth fell open when she saw him. He stumbled in, a push from the guard making him lose his balance. She stood up, but the guard spoke.

"No contact."

She sat back down, hiding her grimace with her hand. He was pushed into the seat at the opposite end of the table, blindfolded. His arms were shackled behind his back and Cil noticed a pair on his ankles. His head fell onto his chest as he slumped into the seat. The fresh purple bruises across his face and neck shone under the fluorescent lights. Cil spotted a few cuts as well. It looked as if he had lost consciousness for a second as his head jerked up. His head turned from side to side, disoriented.

"Where am I?" he croaked.

Cil didn't even recognize his voice. It was tired, hoarse, strained.

"You have a visitor." The Vinto Representative made her way into the room behind the chief guard. "Restrain him. Policy. Any action we deem as harmful or inappropriate will result in submissive tactics."

"No, I won't do anything, I swear. Please."

Cil was repulsed at the sound of begging from Alex. Electrodes were on the belt that was tightened around his waist. Cil wiped back the tears.

She heard him mumble, "No more juice."

She had gotten the OK to visit him through the Italian Government. However, Vinto insisted that a representative be present. Their suspicions of a collaboration between Cil and Alex had given them the legal approval. Cil wasn't surprised. He was being held in limbo and the foreign government was in a hurry to get rid of him. They didn't want to be bogged down with publicity from a respected company such as Vinto. He was scheduled to be flown to Vegas the next day. She didn't want to make any more trouble for Alex and had agreed to the terms of the visit. After a thorough inspection of the personal items the guard told her they would be in his cell when he returned to it. She hoped it was the truth. The blindfold was removed and the chief guard motioned to the representative.

"Only two allowed. You can watch from the other room. Policy."

Alex didn't open his eyes. The door was shut and they were alone.

"Sam?"

The hopefulness in his voice was pitifully obvious. Cil cringed, hoping the rep had not made her way to the other room yet to witness their conversation.

"No, Alex."

"Cil? What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." She paused. "Make sure you were alright."

Alex laughed. There were bruises circling his eyes. He could only open them up to a slit as he lifted his head.

"What did they do to you?"

"I was a bad boy. I didn't exactly go willingly. I broke one of the guard's arms."

"Alex..."

"I know, I should've just gone along."

"What have you told them?"

"Nothing."

"How did they find you?"

"Seems Vinto had informed them of a dangerous fugitive fitting my description, highly menacing and capable of violent actions."

"Bastards."

Alex shrugged and winced. "They did a good job of keeping it hidden, even from your friends underground."

"Nobody got a scent of what they were up to. I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"It's not your fault."

"We're going to get you out of this."

Alex shook his head. "It's too late, Cil."

"No, it isn't."

"I just want to see her. I haven't told them anything. They don't know. Whether Vinto suspects is another story."

"They're going to drill you when you get back to the States."

"They'll kill me before I say anything that puts her in danger." His head fell down again.

"Alex? I brought you some things. The guard said they'd be in your cell."

"Thanks."

"I can't stay long. They only gave me a few minutes. Do you want me to pass along any messages?"

"No, nothing that won't get me in trouble."

"Why didn't you tell me how you felt before all this had to happen?"

"I was scared of what you'd say...that you'd tell me to forget about it."

"I would have. I would have said that because I care about you."

The door opened and the guard appeared, blindfold in hand.

Alex sighed. "Just tell her I love her, that it's not her fault."

Cil nodded. His eyes disappeared under the fabric. He was forced up.

"I love you, Alex."

"I know."

He was led out. Cil fell in a heap on the table, weeping.

He was tossed in the cell, the blindfold still on. It was unnerving, but he was getting used to it.

His life with Sam ended when a cloth bag was placed over his head after he'd been dragged into an alley by a plain-clothes guard. It was over in five quick seconds. The liquid coating of the inner lining of the bag had put him out instantly. When he woke, shackled to a chair, he lashed out kicking the first guard he saw in the face before lunging for the door. He had rammed the still connected chair against it before slamming one of its legs into the side of the guard's stomach. He might have actually broken the door open if he'd been given another minute. Not that it would've gotten him anywhere. Instead, his actions got him a beating that nearly ended his life, sending him into unconsciousness for half a day. The pain woke with him, as did the shackles tying him to a bed. The outburst had made them even more wary and more certain of his dangerous nature.

Time was spent praying to anyone who would listen. When he was allowed the luxury of having the blindfold removed, four concrete walls greeted him. When the door was shut to the cell, he was in the dark. Wrists and ankles rubbed helplessly against what bound him and he screamed. The screams lasted for an hour sometimes. Just screams, begging for release. He'd surprised himself how easily the fear and darkness overpowered him and made him weak. The doors would open and a guard would ask him questions. That was when his mouth would close and his head would shake. They tried to interrogate him once, using electrodes. That had proved futile. He was determined not to say anything that would jeopardize Sam's safety.

His hands felt around the bed sheets for what Cil had left him. Fingers fell over a pile of clothes. The familiar cloth of his jeans passed between his searching fingers. He hoped he might be allowed to change into his own things when he headed back to Vegas. The clothes were used as a pillow as he lay down on the bed. The door opened. Two guards mumbled as they approached. The blindfold was ripped off and they walked back out.

Alex's eyes blinked open, catching a glimpse of the room before the black came again. Though exhausted, he did not sleep except for the brief periods when he would black out. That was when Sam would visit. His eyes would open and the room would be filled with light. She was always sitting at the edge of the bed stroking his hair, smiling.

"Hi," he'd whisper, leaning his cheek against her hand.

She'd smile in response.

"How are you?"

Another smile.

"Why can't you talk to me?" She'd look down at the floor, shyly. "Talk to me, please." She'd turn from him, as the lights began to fade. "No, don't go. I won't ask you again."

The brightness returned when her gaze fell on his face. She'd smile and stroke his hair. He would sit quietly, watching her and feeling the soft skin across his face. Sometimes, when only the sound of breathing could be heard, she'd grasp his wrists and remove the shackles. The hands would be brought to her lips. She kissed the bruises. Those were the times she'd rest her head on his chest, letting him run his fingers through her long, brown hair. He would realize he was dreaming then, remembering the short, red hair that had replaced the strands he was curling between his fingers. One whisper from him and she'd leave. He ached to tell her how much he missed her. He wanted to ask for forgiveness for leaving her in Padua. He wanted to tell her he loved her. Every time she lifted her head he could feel himself leaving her. That was when she would reach for him and kiss his lips tenderly. He would wake shackled to the bed, feeling miserable and alone.

Sam waited on pins and needles for word from Cil. She wouldn't leave the country until she knew he was alright and going back to the States. Her bags were packed. Time passed as Sam sat on the bed

with her laptop on her legs. She'd type letter after letter to Alex, though they would never be sent. They'd be saved in a file or deleted. It was important to find some way to talk to him, some way to vent.

"Sam?" Mira called.

She jumped off the bed and hurtled downstairs. The back of a dark green suit blocked the entranceway to the store. She caught her breath.

"Hiya, Sam." Sid turned and smiled.

Sam grabbed at his large shoulders and hugged him tightly. "Sid."

"How we doin'?"

Her small body shook against his. He let her cry. Somehow, he managed to bring her into the kitchen and sit her down at the table. When she dried her eyes he was still smiling.

"Cil wanted me to make sure you were alright. She saw Alex."

"How is he?"

Sid played with his fingers. "Well, he's alive. They haven't been takin' the best care of him. Don't think he's been cooperatin'."

Sam nodded. It was hard enough imagining him locked up because of her, she didn't want to know she was the cause of his physical pain also.

"Is he going back?"

"Tomorrow."

Sam was relieved. A deep sigh released and she began weeping. Sid's hand rubbed her shoulder.

"What will they do to him? Will they kill him?"

"I'm not goin' to sugar coat it. There's a good chance they will."

"I've got to get back, then."

"Cil figured as much. I'm goin' with you."

Every goodbye Sam had to go through came with tears. She exhausted and sickened herself from all of the crying. She'd always thought she was much stronger. Ajit was the worst. Sam had to pry his hands away from her. Mira put up a brave front until the very end and then burst out sobbing. Sam hadn't calmed down until she and Sid were on the plane.

"You should sleep."

"It's no use trying. I won't be able to."

"Try anyway." Sid stared at her.

"Would you have done what he did?" she asked. "To be with someone you cared about?"

"I don't think about it." His eyes turned to the seat in front of him.

Sam's eyes closed heavily. "Yes, you do."

She felt his breath against her face. "Maybe. Was he good to you?"

Sam nodded. The last thing she felt before falling asleep was Sid's hand against her cheek and his lips on her forehead. Sid left Sam at the airport.

"I'll keep in touch. If you need anythin', you can reach me here." He placed a note into the palm of her hand. "Remember, not a word of any of this to anyone. I don't have to tell you what it could mean to Alex."

"Absolutely."

The first stop she made was to the bank. It was the only thing on her mind since the plane landed. Upon opening the safety deposit box in the private booth she breathed a sigh of relief. She placed the disc in her laptop. No tampering had been done. It was exactly as she remembered it. Once a copy had been made on her laptop, she placed the original in the box and locked it away.

The house looked vaguely familiar when she pulled up. It belonged to someone else in her mind. Cil had left everything in pristine condition after she had worn out her stay. She stood in the doorway, looking around. It didn't feel like home any more. All she felt was defeat. Sighing, she made her way up the stairs. Shadows wove their usual patterns against the hall walls as the light cut through the curtained window in jagged shafts. A cursory glance was given to her mother's room as she passed.

Her bag was placed on her bed. She sat down next to it. She was tired of everything. She wanted to be rid of all of it. The doorbell woke her. Rubbing her eyes, she yawned and got up. Her steps were slow. Sam spied Cat through the peephole. She looked anxious, flushed. Sam opened the door.

"Hey!" Cat threw her arms around Sam. "Why didn't you let me know you were back? I heard it from Cil a half-hour ago."

"I just got in. You talked to Cil?"

"Yeah, she asked me if you'd made it home safe. I got so worried. I called, no answer...so I headed over. What did you do to your hair?" Her fingers grabbed at the tips.

Sam brushed them away. "I cut it."

"I can see that. Why?"

"Felt like it."

"All of a sudden?"

Sam shrugged. "Come in."

"Thanks. So, fill me in on everything. You really never said much in the letters you sent me."

Sam rubbed the back of her neck. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Sure. Why Europe?"

"Hm?"

"Why the interest in Europe all of a sudden?"

"Don't know. Just needed to get away."

Cat nodded, her fingers tapping against the mug. "Sam? I...I've been hearing things."

Sam looked up. "What things? What are you talking about?"

It took Cat a minute to form her thoughts. "Everyone at V.A.P. is shocked about you resigning. Aggie says there's something wrong, but you won't tell her what it is. You've been calling in all sorts of favors concerning Vinto. Cil didn't know what to make of it either."

Sam laughed, amazed at how good of an actress Cil truly was. Cat looked at her scornfully.

"What have you been doing in Europe? It's an op, isn't it? What's his name, Sam?"

Eyes wide with surprise, Sam opened her mouth to dismiss the question. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Is it the one you used to visit downtown? I've known about him for a while. I followed you one night, a couple of years ago. You and your Mom."

"And didn't say anything?"

"Figured there was a reason you didn't want me to know."

"His name is Ajit."

Cat's face twisted in disgust. "You went to Europe with him? You're in love with him."

"No. I've known Ajit for a long time. He's part of my family. I love him. I'm not in love with him."

"Does he work for Vinto?"

Sam stared at the table. *How?*

"I found out about Vinto's openings on my first California exhibition five years ago. A few women had gotten invites as a goof. I didn't go of course, but they told me all about it."

"He doesn't work for Vinto."

"Then who is it?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Because I want to know who's responsible for corrupting you this way. You can still clear yourself."

"Clear myself?"

"If you get back to work and go on with your life, you won't be charged with any wrongdoing."

"I haven't done anything wrong. What charges?"

"The charges everyone is going to make about you once they find out what you've been doing. You'll never be able to look anyone in the face again. You have to repent."

Sam shook her head. "You sound like a faith healer."

"I'm serious. Just look at Cil."

It all clicked. Why Cat had become so judgmental of Cil. Being polite simply out of respect for Sam. She'd known before Sam even had a clue. The stares her friends gave Cil. How she dreaded her visits and stayed away when she was around.

"You've already punished Cil for what she does."

"Cil will get her punishment. I know she has something to do with all of this. She waited 'til your mother was dead. She found your weakness and exploited it."

"I think you should leave, Cat."

"It's too late for Cil, she's buried herself with Vinto, but you still have a chance."

"Please," Sam whispered, "leave."

"I just wish I'd done something before it came to this. I thought you'd make the right decisions on your own." Her fingers released the mug as she got up. "Call me if you need to talk."

Sam sat on the couch, staring. Her thoughts traveled elsewhere. The house felt as if it were caving in on her. Cat's ramblings had taken their toll. *Another person I didn't know.* Her leg began to twitch. *I*

can't stay here. I need to go to him.

"You just got back!" Sid yelled at her through the monitor.

"Look, either you take me or I go on my own."

"It's not goin' to make a difference."

"I don't care." Sam motioned to the disconnect button.

"Alright, alright...shit! Give me a couple of hours. I'll get in touch with ya."

Sam smiled, disconnecting the scrambled signal. "We've got to figure out a way for me to see him."

"There's no way. You'll never get in."

"They let Cil in to see him."

"That was different. She was on the inside with Vinto. And besides, it was in Europe."

Sid had been driving for a few hours. The dark highway loomed ahead of them.

"Have you heard anything about his sentencing yet?"

"Not yet. He'll get a half-ass trial in a few weeks."

"Sid, what if they know about Alex and me?"

"We have to hope they don't."

Chapter 46

~ Vision ~

—
"It's a good plan, Cil." Sid sat next to Sam on the opposite side of the table. "It won't draw suspicion."

"It's too risky."

"I need to see him, Cil."

"If you don't help her, she'll get in on her own. That'll cause more problems."

"You owe this to me."

Cil nodded. "Alright. I'll contact Alex's lawyer, see what she says." The disc was turned over in her hands. "Not that this will help."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do."

The steps to the visiting room were anxious ones. Sam walked alongside Bree Phillips.

"Just relax. You'll see him soon."

Sam had seen this woman on countless television shows and newscasts. It was only a week ago that she had met her in person. She was one of the most prominent defense lawyers on the west coast, a staunch opponent of government officials like Senator Atwood whose policies toward male citizens was becoming commonplace. Cil had spared no expense for Alex. She'd been flown to Vegas and given full access to every bit of information.

Sam was surprised at how willing Bree was to assist in getting her in to see Alex. The idea was to have Sam pose as an intern of Phillips' firm and accompany Bree on one of her visits. It would be easy to set-up and Bree was confident in the ruse. Her work with the underground made her willing to take chances others would not dare. Even at their first meeting, conversations concerning Alex's situation had been grim. She was up front about his chances.

"I've only won two cases where an op was the defendant. And the only reason they were spared was because tests had proved them to be positively viable."

"Viable?"

"Able to be hosts. Their DNA and their sperm saved them, plain and simple."

"Is Alex?"

"I should know in a few days. But this case is beginning to draw national attention. It will make an acquittal extremely difficult. Too many people are ready to jump on the bandwagon. And the amount of time we're being given is ridiculously minimal. My appeals were dismissed. Both you and Cil need to prepare yourself."

The guards waved Ms. Phillips in without a second glance. Her reputation preceded her, followed by an air of celebrity that spread interest and along the faces of the guards and management of the detention center. Sam wasn't even looked at as they passed through the detectors and security checks. Both ID badges cleared and Bree gave her a comforting nod.

"I told you there was nothing to worry about. Lawyer/client confidentiality is the key here. It's illegal

to record our conversations once we get inside. If they do that and use it, we'd get an immediate dismissal. I wish they would do something that stupid. However, it's Vinto we're dealing with so don't get your hopes up."

"But Vinto doesn't run the detention center."

"No, but it doesn't take a lot of money, by the looks of some of these guards, to find someone willing to do some spying. Just remember, you're here to see him, see how he is. There's no need to rehash everything that's happened in case someone's listening. If we can work on the basic humanity angle, get those reviewing the case to feel some sympathy, it can't do anything but help. If, however, they see it as just another display of the violent nature inherent in a male, we are...how did Alex say it...screwed."

"Will you use it?"

"Well, I have a few more days to decide. I'll have to talk it over with Alex and see how he feels. I don't think it can do anymore damage at this point, though. The board in charge of this case has already come to the conclusion that he is a monster. It could either reinforce or change that idea."

How could anyone think he was a monster?

The door shut, leaving Sam to gaze at the gray bricks of the three walls in the small room. The fourth wall contained a small window-sized mirror in the middle of it. Bree sat at the desk facing it. She motioned to the chair in the corner.

"There. I don't want him to see you right away," she whispered. "Transcribe something."

Sam sat in the corner able to catch a side view into the mirror. As soon as she pulled out a notepad fluorescent lights illuminated the opening. Bree's reflection disappeared and Sam peeked in. She sat back, feeling her heart race. Bree gave her a quick motion to calm down from under her desk. Her eyes went to the ceiling. Shuffling sounds, chains. A guard's voice mumbled something. Bree responded. The door shut. A few seconds passed.

"Hello, Alex. How are we doing today?"

"Don't know, you tell me."

Sam closed her eyes when she heard his voice. The familiar ache passed through her body, settling in her chest.

"I wanted to talk to you about some evidence I've received."

"Evidence?" A passing hint of curiosity came through in his word.

"The tape of the night in Vegas."

"How did you...?"

"A close friend of yours."

Sam heard him whispered, "Sam?"

His voice felt closer. He was leaning into the glass, she was sure of it. Bree nodded.

"Have you seen Sam?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Bree interrupted. "Sam's doing quite well. He sends his regards."

Sam remembered Bree's prepping, telling her she would address Sam as a male. Alex caught on.

"Is he here in Vegas?"

"Yes."

Every syllable he spoke made her blood race. She didn't know how long she could sit quietly. There was excitement and concern in his voice.

"Would he...does he want to visit me?"

"Very much. He's concerned about how you are."

"I'm worried about him, too."

"Would you be able to act..." Bree searched for the right word, "accordingly, if he visited?"

"Of course."

Bree nodded. "I have a new intern with me. El wasn't feeling well." Bree motioned to the corner.

"Could you hand me those notes?"

Sam got up, feeling her knees about to give way. Her eyes never left the glass as she approached. He sat at the desk smiling down at his folded hands. Sam was shocked to see him appear so happy. She didn't expect her visit would have that much of a reaction. She leaned against the frame, staring at him. He looked up at Bree.

She's alright. The thought repeated itself as he looked down at his folded hands bouncing against the table at the news. *She's in Vegas. So close.* The information helped raise his spirits knowing she was doing what she could to help him. *Didn't forget about me.*

"When might he be able to..."

He caught himself in mid-sentence. The lost look in his eyes was replaced with instant recognition. The smile widened. Sam's eyes filled with tears. She placed a hand over her mouth. Bree got up and placed Sam in the seat, facing him.

"Try and calm down." The tight grip on her shoulders forced her to sit up.

Alex's eyes became glassy. *Don't cry.* It took Sam a minute to compose herself. His folded hands went to the glass, leaning his fingers against it. He watched as Sam did the same. Bree sat on the edge of the desk, fumbling through some papers.

"How are you?" he whispered.

Sam shrugged. "Alright, I guess. How are you doing?"

"Better now."

The smile was genuine. She watched his face light up and soften. He pursed his lips together.

Sam smiled. "I'm sorry."

"Sh." His eyes traveled over her.

She looked down at his fingers. "I'm glad you came."

"I wanted to see you before the trial."

"I've been worried about you. I wasn't sure how you'd handle everything on your own."

"You've been worried about me?"

Alex nodded. "Of course I have."

"What about yourself?"

"I can't really do much about this, doesn't make much sense to worry."

"Bree and Cil are doing everything they can to get you out of here."

"That doesn't matter. As long as you're OK."

"Of course it matters."

He bit his lip. "I knew the risks. I'm willing to face the consequences."

"But there's a chance."

The smile faded from his face. "No, there isn't. I'm not getting out of here."

"We can't think like that. Cil would go insane if she did."

"I know. I understand why she has to do this. But I can't kid myself." Alex pressed his forehead against the glass. "You can't either. You need to prepare yourself. Figure out what you're going to do after this is all over." He looked down at the desk.

Sam shook her head. "I don't want to talk about this."

He smiled at her. "Alright."

"I have your drawings."

"Good. They won't let me sketch in here. Sharp objects." He rolled his eyes, lightening the mood.

"Do you need anything?"

"Another visit would be nice."

Bree pulled another chair to the table next to Sam. "We'll see what we can do. Alex, I need to ask you a few things. The tape. I need to know if you want me to admit it as evidence."

"If you think it will help."

"I'm going to review it with my partners before deciding and then I'll go over it with you."

"OK."

Alex talked to Bree as he watched Sam. Sam took inventory of him, noting the exhaustion on his face. Whatever he was eating wasn't enough. It looked like he'd lost weight in the small amount of time he'd been away from her. His eyes were the one thing that looked exactly the same. Still bright, still able to stare right into her, know what she was thinking.

"Alex? Who else knows about you and Sam?"

They both turned to look at her.

"I told you about everyone."

"Cil, Mira, Joanne, Sid, Ajit...anyone else?"

"Liselle."

Alex nodded at Sam's comment. "Sam worked for her in Padua. I mean there were people that saw us together, but..."

"Anyone you can think of that might be a threat? We have to assume Vinto has caught on and that they'll use it. I'm weeding out who it might be."

"No, there's no one else."

"If you come up with any other names, let me know next time."

"Sure." Alex traced over Sam's hand absentmindedly with his finger through the glass.

Bree stood up. "I'm going to get something to drink. Will you take care of these questions?"

A blank sheet of paper was pushed in front of Sam. She nodded, smiling. A knock requested the opening of the door. Sam sat back in the chair. Alex did the same on the opposite side. The door opened.

"I'll be back in a few minutes."

Sam could hear her commenting to the guard before they exchanged a laugh. The sealing of the door echoed for a few seconds.

"I hate this." Alex leaned in. "I wish I didn't have to worry about what I can and can't say." It was quiet for a minute. "What was Cil's reaction when she found out?"

"She didn't tell you? She was disappointed," Sam's eyebrows went up, "to say the least."

"I knew she wouldn't understand."

"I think she just didn't want it to end up like this."

"Like her and Ryan."

Sam bit the inside of her lip. She couldn't stand not telling him everything that Cil had told her about his father. *It's not going to help him now. I'll tell him in time.* She shook her head.

"I'm so glad I got to see you. Are they treating you alright?"

"As well as can be expected. I'm trying to be on my best behavior. I don't want a repeat performance like in Europe."

Sam's eyes returned to the scar on his cheek. Her fingers motioned to her own face.

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to talk about that. Could you bring me some of my drawings next time?"

"Sure."

"And some of Sam's, too?"

"I'll ask him if he's done anything recently."

There was a knowing grin. "Thanks."

"Bree should be finding out the test results tomorrow."

"Yeah, I'm kind of hoping it's negative."

"Why? You'd have the chance to..."

"Be a host? I'd rather be in here. It sounds good from your end, not mine."

"The security is supposed to be minimal at those places. It's as close to a...a regular life that most males get."

"Do you know what ops call those places? Op farms. The men there are treated barely better than cattle." He shrugged off the comment. "I guess I could get used to it if it meant I could get visitors."

"You're right. It's not the place for you. I was being selfish."

He whispered. "That's good, means you still want to be with me."

Sam smiled. "Always."

He turned serious. "You know what will happen if they convict me? I mean, if they spare my life? I won't just be put in a cell. They'll make sure they take everything away from me so I'll be useless."

"You can't think about that."

"I used to think that was what I wanted. Before I met you. That it would make life easier. Take away all my problems. The one thing I couldn't stand, though, is not being able to talk to you. Tell you how I feel. I couldn't live like that."

Sam watched his hands as they signed. *This wouldn't be enough for me. If I can't touch you I don't want to live that way. I was thinking how different everything would be. I couldn't make love to you... feel your body the way I would want to... whisper to you.*

"Don't Alex."

That's all I think about. How much I want to be with you. He searched for the same feelings on Sam's face. Inside you again. I remember every touch. Isn't that crazy? They go through my mind over and over.

Her eyes filled with tears. "So do I."

I miss you so much. I wish I'd listened to you and never left that morning. It'll never be that way again. I'll never be with you again like that. You have to understand that. No matter what happens, there's no way I'll be able to be with you again.

Her hands replaced her voice. *I know.*

Maybe it's better if I'm not around to constantly remind you of what we...

No. Don't say that. I love you.

I know, you love me too much. I have the same problem. I can't imagine living without you. I can't even remember my life before you anymore.

Alex, please. She looked down at her hands. Love me enough to want to live for me.

Alex nodded. The door opened. It took Sam a few minutes to settle down after Alex was taken away. The only exchange they could make was with their eyes. She smiled when he signed for her to be good. She told him she loved him with her hands and then he was gone. The ride back to her hotel was a quiet one. Bree didn't ask and Sam didn't divulge anything.

"I'll call you as soon as I get the results."

With that, Bree was off and Sam walked into the lobby.

Chapter 47

~ Substitutes ~

A short message from Cil was on her laptop. Just checking in... right. Her cynicism with Cil had increased since the revelation in Europe. After all the lies she had told Alex she had no reason to trust anything she said anymore. Their conversations were forced, unnatural. Her mother was the only reminder of her need to be civil toward her. She read Sid's e-mail requesting to see her that night. He gave her instructions on when and where. If you want to talk about today. Figured you might. A response confirming the meeting time was sent off.

Smoke clung to the low ceiling of the club, floating down in tufts and trails of colored cotton. Sam sipped her drink, gazing into the crowd that increased as the night crept on toward morning. The sounds were familiar and soothing, something she would have never thought possible a few short years ago. She waited for Sid to return with his drink. An op, eyeing her for some time at the bar, made his way to her table. He was pale, blond, and eerily reminiscent of Alex. Sam looked down at the table briefly before looking back up at him.

"Are you alone this evening?"

"No."

He looked around the club, then grinned. "Really?"

"Really."

Relief spread across her face as she spotted Sid parting the crowd. She motioned to him and he smiled, drink in hand. The boy-man followed her eyes.

"Oh...I see. I'll leave you to your company then." With a disheartened look he retreated back to his seat.

"Can't leave you alone for a minute." Sid laughed as he sat down next to her.

Sam shrugged. "Thank you for coming when you did. Another minute and who knows?"

"What?" He looked over at the op glancing in Sam's direction. "You wouldn't have."

"He reminded me of Alex."

"That's all it takes...a reminder?"

"Seems like it." She shook her head. "It's awful, I know. But seeing him today made me want to..." Her voice trailed off. "You don't want to hear all of this."

"Tell me." Sid gripped her hand, stroking her fingers.

"I wanted to touch him, but I couldn't. He was so close." She held his hand tightly.

"Don't believe Alex. He can't see what's possible from where he is. He has a chance, especially with that tape."

"But he was so sure, Sid."

"You can't be sure of anythin'."

Sam laughed. "Positive you two aren't brothers?"

Sid shook his head and smiled. "Both of us bein' around Cil when we were growin' up made us similar. At least that's my theory."

"I know he'd love to see you."

"I wish I could visit, too."

Sam watched as his fingers traced her inner arm. Suddenly, her head filled with confusion. Her eyes closed and they were Alex's hands traveling up her arm.

"Sid? What are you doing?"

"Nothin'."

She opened her eyes and saw him grinning at her. Her shoulder shrugged his hand away as she moved back in her seat. She stirred her drink for a few minutes. He sat next to her, enjoying the scene.

"I can make you feel better, Sam. I mean, I can't do what Alex can, but if you need to be with someone, I can make you feel better. I want to." He found her hand. "No one has to know."

Her mouth closed tightly. "This isn't fair, you know that."

"I know. I'm playin' every card I've got."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "While you were concentratin' on Alex, I was concentratin' on you. I just want you to know I'm here, that's all, if you ever want to."

She nodded. "I have to use the bathroom. I'll be right back."

"I'll be here."

She headed in the direction of the bathroom. The Alex impersonator turned in his seat facing her. She sighed, walking past quickly. The cold water against her skin cleared her head. A group of women chattered behind her as ratings of various ops were exchanged.

"You snagged the best one."

It took her a few seconds before Sam realized the comment was made to her. She turned.

"Did I?"

"Oh, yes." The woman in burgundy flicked her cigarette against the ashtray. "We all agree on that, don't we ladies?"

They giggled like school girls. Sam gave them a small smile and fumbled in her purse for nothing. Her hand found the door and she returned to Sid.

"I need to get back."

"I'll drive you." Sid got up.

"Too risky. Besides, I can't do that to Alex. He's done so much for me. It would be wrong. You know that as well as I do."

He looked across the room. "Have a nice night."

She left him at the table. The humid air stuck to her as soon as the door opened onto the street. Ops gave her the quick once-over as she looked for her rented transport. Once her bearings returned, she stared across the street into the dimly lit lot and recalled parking inside. The scuffle of her shoes against the concrete gained a purposeful rhythm. *Sid met me in the lot earlier.* The awareness that she was alone in an unknown area made her shiver. Keycard in hand she finally found the transport. It fit easily and welcomed her safely into the interior. She slid inside, gripped the steering wheel, and listened to the steady pounding of her heart.

The transport started to hum. She programmed the control panel with her destination. Laughter caught her attention as she looked up at the front windshield. Her nerves calmed when she realized in was the Alex impersonator with a friend. They walked to the car facing hers on the opposite side of the lot.

Am I ever going to get away from this guy tonight?

They sat on the hood and lit up two cigarettes. The streetlight framed the scene nicely. It was only a minute before they realized they were being watched. She continued to set the transport. Another laugh was followed by a cough. Intrigued Sam looked up briefly.

"Jesus, Michael, what the hell's in this?" 'Alex' wheezed, as his friend rubbed his back.

Hm...Michael and Alex.

She stopped playing with the controls. Leaning in, she took a good look for the first time and tried to make out the facial features. She was too far away.

You're going completely nuts. What are the chances?

Her mind raced back to the picture she had seen of him: dark hair, eyes, nice build. An insane thought filled her head. Turning the destination tracker off she pulled out of the parking spot. The transport cornered abruptly as she approached the seated figures and then stopped. The tinted window of the passenger side was rolled down. Recognition spread across the face of 'Alex'. Sam peered at the other male casually.

God, it is him.

'Alex' hopped off the hood. "Hello again. Can we help you?" He grinned devilishly.

"Yeah, actually, I seem to have forgotten how to get to the Baud Hotel and this machine had the audacity to break down on me." She tapped the control panel. "You wouldn't be able to offer any assistance would you?"

"Sure. Once you hit the corner of 35th..."

"You know, I'm really awful with directions. Think you could show me?"

'Alex' beamed. "Sure."

Sam released the lock on the door. He slid inside, flicking the cigarette out the window. Sam motioned to Michael.

"Going to leave your friend?"

"He can take care of himself." The eyebrows arched.

"Do you need a ride anywhere?"

Michael eyed her for a second. Sam watched the back of 'Alex's' head shake in Michael's direction. She laughed nervously.

"Actually, I could use a ride."

Sam was surprised at the depth in his voice. He headed to the back door. Sam watched 'Alex' mutter to himself as the door opened and shut. She glanced back at him to make absolutely sure.

"Where do you need to go?" Her eyes caught Michael's in the rearview mirror.

"I'll just tag along." He grinned.

"Baud Hotel, then?" Sam was unable to take her eyes off him.

"Well, I could show you a few more interesting sights in Vegas. There's a ton of shit to do."

"I'm Sam, by the way."

"Oh...Brian. The tag-along back there is Michael."

Michael nodded in the mirror. "There's a great club a few miles from here."

"I've had enough of clubs tonight."

Brian smiled. "Looking for something a bit more private?"

Sam shook her head. "I think directions back to the hotel will be enough."

He nodded. Sam and Michael were quiet for the majority of the ride. Brian did most of the talking. Brian tapped on the windshield.

"Stop her for a second. Have to pick up something."

Sam pulled to the curb. The building looked abandoned. It was two stories high with planks of wood nailed across what were once windows. The door framing the entrance was ready to give way.

"What is this?"

"My place." He hopped out of the transport. "Would you like to come in for a minute?"

"No, thanks." Sam somehow managed a smile.

"Be right back."

He glanced in the back seat at Michael. Sam watched Michael lean his chin against the door. He looked sleepy. They made the briefest eye contact before he gazed ahead. Sam remembered what Alex had said about him. He was not one to talk much.

"Go to that club often?" Sam began.

"Not really."

"How about your friend?"

"No."

Sam realized the absurdity of the situation. Why she had offered a ride to these two ops? What was she planning on doing anyway?

"Never seen you around here before." Michael had his hands on his knees.

"Just visiting."

"Been to the casinos yet?"

"Not yet. Do you go?"

"Yeah...equal opportunity to lose your money, at least for an op after two in the morning."

Speaking of opportunities...

"I mainly check out the clubs around the area. Was at Vinto's the other night," Michael said.

"It's funny. I met a male once at Vinto's that reminds me a lot of your friend Brian."

It took a few seconds for the disinterest to fade. "Yeah?"

"Yes. I thought he was Alex when I saw him tonight. Then I realized it couldn't be him."

"Why?"

A tinge of jealousy crept into Sam. "You didn't hear?" Sam turned in her seat. "He's been arrested."
His mouth opened slightly. "For what?"

"I heard something about assault on the news."

"Shit." Michael looked down.

"You know him?"

"I might. If it's the guy I'm thinking of."

"Blond, blue eyes, small frame...tall. He's the son of one of the curators at Vinto."

"Yeah. Shit."

Michael repeated it, shaking his head. He searched his pockets and a pack of cigarettes eventually emerged. "Do you mind?"

Sam shook her head.

Once the cigarette was lit, he laid his head back against the seat. "That's awful."

Sam watched the genuine sadness in his face. "Seems like you knew him well."

"I did, a few years back. Last time I saw him was two months ago."

Sam's brow furrowed. "Where at?"

Michael looked out the window. "Don't think he'll be back. Brian. He's more than likely passed out in bed. I'm sure he had a hit of something. Does it all the time." The back door opened. "Give me a minute to check on him and then I'll help you get back to your hotel."

Michael sat alongside her in the passenger seat. From his account Brian was on the bathroom floor, muttering to himself. Sam asked if an ambulance needed to be called.

Michael stated flatly, "Don't bother. It's not like they'll come to this area anyway. He'll sleep it off like he always does."

"So, you said you'd seen Alex a few months ago?"

"Yeah. Just keep going straight."

"Where?" It was getting impossible to control her curiosity.

"In Vancouver. At a club."

"He gets around."

Michael laughed. "Yeah. That's Alex. He had black hair, though. That's why I didn't recognize him at first."

Sam felt her chest tighten in anxiety and anger. *When did he...?*

"I only saw him for a few seconds as he was leaving the club. I'd gone back in to see if anyone had spotted him. From what I got out of a few people, he was just making the regular rounds. You can let me off here. Hotel's just a few blocks down."

"Sure."

"You must be really worried about him."

Sam turned to face him. "What?"

"About Alex. I know, Sam. About you and Alex." He smiled. "You need to work on bluffing."

She stared at the dimly lit figure next to her. The lit tip of his cigarette was all she could see, coming back to life as he inhaled.

"I've been keeping an eye on him since I left Vienna. I have a lot of friends that run in the same circles. He has a tendency to get himself into trouble."

"You've been watching him all this time?"

He nodded. "When I found out he had disappeared with a woman..."

"How many people know?"

"Not many, but I'm sure Vinto does. You have to be careful. You can't trust everyone around you. And no more nightly pickups."

Sam sighed heavily. "Do you know something?"

"If you need to get in contact with me, you know where to find me. Just be careful. For Alex's sake."

"Michael, wait."

"I hope you love him enough to do that." He looked her over one last time. "I'm glad I finally got the chance to meet you. Just remember, nothing is a coincidence."

Sam lay in her hotel bed staring at the ceiling. *Why didn't he tell me?* She knew what night it had been. The one night they spent at Joanne's in Vancouver. The only time they'd been gone from each other an entire evening. She recalled how she had walked past the room he was sleeping in with the shears in her hand. Her fingers grabbed the ends of her hair, twisting it as she bit her lip. It wasn't the lying that upset her, the concealment. It was the fact that he felt, for some reason, that he *had* to do it. How much money do you have left? I don't want to rely on anyone else.

"Alex, you didn't have to, we would have figured something out."

She turned to lie on her side, her hands under the pillows. The situation was so endlessly hopeless it was wearing her down. It was like being in purgatory. Waiting and waiting.

"Help me." Alex pulled at the knot he had made in his tie, trying to remove it.

They were back in their bedroom in Padua. Sam's eyes took him in as he kneeled in front of her on the edge of the bed, resting his palms on her knees. His sides pressed against the inside of her bare thighs as he moved into her. He pulled the fabric up and revealed more of her to him. He found the soft flesh of her bottom and massaged her skin. Her smile broadened as she brought her fingers to the knot, picking at the fabric with her nails. He kissed the side of her face.

"Alex, I can't get it while you're doing that."

His eyes glowed as he lifted his chin in a cocky gesture. Sam peered down at him. His hands made their way to her back unzipping her dress down to the waist. The knot had finally loosened and Sam pulled out the long strip of fabric. It slid from around his neck. Her lips went to his neck. He pulled her closer as her fingers snaked under the collar of his blue jacket, exposing his white shirt. Alex pushed her onto the bed with the force of his lips. He traced her mouth with his tongue. She felt it peek into her open mouth, teasing her. She heard herself moan.

He broke away, looking down on her. Sam noticed the fresh scar on his cheek. His eyes lost the glow they held moments earlier. His mouth closed tightly, looking deep in thought. She grabbed his neck, pulling herself up to kiss him.

"Alex?" She laid her head on his shoulder, her arms locked around him. "I just want to be with you."

"Do you remember what we did tonight? We made love for hours." A faint smile graced his face.
"And we made love that morning and in the afternoon."

"I remember," she said.

"What else am I good for?" The question was tainted with apprehension. "Besides making love to you, what am I good for? Why do you stay with me?" His profile stared down at the floor. "I know I'm not good for anything else. There's no way you would want to be with me, after..."

"Yes, I would. I love you."

"You say that now."

"I'll always say that."

"It wasn't supposed to end up like this. We were supposed to make it together. I had so many plans for us." His fingers slid over hers.

"There has to be a way to move on, get past this."

"I don't have a choice, Sam. You are the one with the choices."

"You said once it was enough just to love me."

"It will always be enough for me. It's all I'll have. But you can have so much more than that. Why do you have to be so stubborn?"

"I'm always stubborn when it comes to you."

His eyes trailed up to her lips. His hands cupped her face and he kissed her lightly, like a warm breeze. His thumb brushed her bottom lip.

"I don't want to talk anymore."

Alex lay on the small, hard mattress listening to the sound of the air filling his lungs. He exhaled, trying at some form of meditation. His thoughts were filled with Sam, how she had looked and what she had said to him. It was hard to give up all hope after seeing her. It had rekindled his need to get out. He felt the ache in his body as he traced the contours of her lips with his thoughts. How the eyelids fluttered above those deep brown eyes when she had blushed. The sighs that had left her mouth. Her voice. Tears slid down the sides of his face as he concentrated on his breathing.

A knock on her hotel door woke her. She fumbled up in bed looking for a clock. Her sleepy eyes blinked. It was close to noon. She wrapped a robe around her as she hurried to answer the persistent knocking. Bree greeted her with a smile that was anything but reassuring.

"I'm sorry to come unannounced."

"No, it's alright, please." She motioned her into the room.

"The tests were not what we had hoped for."

Sam took another blow that chipped away at the optimism she had worked so hard to maintain.

"And," Bree sat down on the chair, placing her briefcase on her lap. "I received word this morning that they are going forward. The state of Nevada has very strict mandates when it comes to ops that are suspected of sexual assault. With the new law I knew it was only a matter of time."

Suddenly Sam understood. "Without a trial?"

"The trial is just to prove his innocence or guilt. Cil didn't want you to know, but I thought you had a right to."

"Alex knows?"

Bree nodded. "It's been a wait and see situation."

"When?"

"The end of this week."

Sam fought back her tears. "I have to see him again. I have to be there for him."

"I'll do my best." She stood up, noticeably uncomfortable. "I'll get to work on it for you right away."

"Is there anything you can do for him?"

"I wish there was. It's getting worse instead of better for them." She tugged at the jacket of her tailored suit as she walked to the door. "But the most important thing to keep our minds on is getting him out. If you need me." Bree let herself out.

The lot filled up quickly once it hit midnight. Sam had been waiting in her car for hours. The entire day had been a blur. She couldn't even remember driving to this spot. She examined the occupants of each vehicle as they made their way to the bar. She bit her nails, hoping she would see him. The arrival of a red convertible claimed all of her attention. Michael drove into the lot. She strained to follow with her eyes, her head touching the windshield. Once he was parked in the far corner, he exited quietly. She composed herself as her transport door squeaked open.

She wondered how soon he recognized her. When she got out of the transport? When he had driven by and given a quick glance to the tinted windows of her vehicle? As she approached his seated figure on the hood?

"Hello, Sam."

Michael blew cigarette smoke out of the corner of his mouth. Nonchalantly, he took the brown cigarette from his mouth and offered it to her. She shook her head.

"Something wrong?"

"Yes."

He motioned to the car. "Come on."

She hesitated a second before opening the passenger side door. If Alex trusted him she would, too. He started the conversation after pulling out of the lot.

"Is he alright?"

"For now. I'm not stupid, Michael. I know you went to a lot of trouble to find out about Alex and me, because of your feelings for him. How long have you been following me?"

A grin appeared on his face as he stared at the road ahead. "Since you got to Vegas."

"How much did you pay that guy, Brian, or whatever his name is?"

"Enough."

"You wanted to see if I'd give in?"

"Not exactly."

"That's bullshit and you know it. What you said last night about nothing being a coincidence..."

"Look, you passed my test. I thought that when you pulled up to us in the lot and made that lame attempt at your car being messed up that I had you. When you offered Brian a ride I was sure you had

other things in mind. But then you asked me and that was when I knew you had made me. I played it out for as long as I could."

He turned a sharp corner, the palm of one hand steering the wheel effortlessly. They entered a street filled with sparkle, people, and noise. There was no hiding now. The night air whipped the hair around her face. She pulled the strands back with one hand, staring at him. He was incredibly calm, solid. There was no denying he was a beautiful man, different from Alex, but still beautiful. Her eyes watered from the harsh, hot wind and the feelings inside her.

"He loved you very much," she said.

She saw his jaw lock shut under the tan of his cheeks, his eye narrow into a tiny slit.

"I know he was happy with you, even though he didn't want to admit it. Afraid he would hurt my feelings, my pride, I don't know. And you loved him. You love him still, don't you?"

Michael jerked to a stop, breaking the still portrait. Sam gripped the dashboard, preventing herself from falling forward. She looked around at the activity circling her. Although she should have felt safe, her heart pounded up into her throat.

He faced her, one hand tightly closed over the back of her seat. "What do you want, Sam?"

"I want the truth," her attention diverted itself to her shoes, "from someone. For some reason I think you're the only one that will give it to me."

He pulled out, his hand still on the back of her seat as he maneuvered through traffic. Sam fought with her flyaway strands, pulling them behind her ears.

"It's hard to admit defeat, that there's no way you can win. That someone is better off without you."

"You don't have to remind me of my loss."

"I wasn't talking about you. They're going to destroy him in there. He's scheduled for surgery the end of this week."

"Shit." Michael groaned. "They'll kill him if that happens."

"I know. That's why I came to see you. I've done all I can."

"He doesn't want my help." Michael drove down a deserted stretch of road.

"You left him, Michael. He never would have left you. You knew it was time for him to move on. You helped him. He needs that help again." Sam shook her head. "Life with you was good and easy. Life with me has been nothing but complications, look where he is. If you can save him I'd be so grateful. I want him to have the chance at a life he deserves."

"You're asking for a miracle." They drove on for a mile. "Have any ideas?"

Sam tried in vain to smile. "A few."

Chapter 48

~ Plans ~

—

"I just need your signature right here, Ms. Dumas, and then I'll have someone escort you back to your hotel." The officer extended a pen to Sam.

"Sure." Sam signed her name with a shaky hand. "But I'm fine getting back by myself."

The officer stared her down. "Under the circumstances you've been through tonight..."

"It's alright. Unless you can't let me go back alone?"

"No, the decision is yours completely."

"Good."

"I would advise, however, that you take extra precautions next time. Don't head for that section of town without someone accompanying you."

Sam's attempt at seeming slightly curious wore thin. "So, what happens to him?"

"He'll be booked, processed, and then taken to the detention center."

"When?"

"More than likely tomorrow morning. Your statement guarantees at least a week's stay before release. If you change your mind..."

"I won't. I'll be out of here by then."

The officer nodded. "But if you do, it'll warrant a longer stay for him and a trial."

"I understand."

"Give us a call if you need any further assistance."

"I will."

Alex sat alone on the stone bench a few yards from the door to the center. The glass enclosure, try as it might to substitute the free access to the ground outside, helped to funnel a mildew-scented, antiseptic breeze that circled around his legs. He watched the fabric of his pants shuffle about in the wind's current. There were six other detainees in the lot with him. They sat at the aluminum table deep in conversation as they smoked. He made a point of keeping to himself. They were all around his age. He thought he recognized one who had frequented the clubs in Vegas.

Alex's privileges were few and far between compared to the short-timers. There were the whispers that followed him in the commissary, the parting of bodies when he walked into the recreation area to play pool. Everyone around him knew of his death sentence, treating him as if he were already a ghost trapped in the shadows. It was as if his future was contagious.

He leaned back against the granite, looking up at the noon sky. The bright sun distorted his vision. He hated staying out here. His required time 'outside' just made him feel worse. He ached to smell the fresh air. The scent from the wild flowers growing on the opposite side of the glass could only be imagined. His shoes tapped against the concrete nervously.

A security van drove back and forth outside the area. Alex noted the two story stone wall that encased the entire detention center. Guards were posted everywhere. The only way someone would attempt

escape was if they wanted to commit suicide. He grinned as he contemplated the thought. The back of his head rubbed against the cold wall. He reached up to rub his temples.

Tomorrow.

He couldn't get that word out of his head. It echoed continuously. Banging his head against the wall as he screamed he had caused himself to pass out the previous day. That had been the only solace he felt during the entire week. Everything was closing in around him. He shut his eyes and concentrated on his breathing. He balled his fists, pressing his knuckles into the cold granite. A visit from Sam was looking less and less likely. *Probably better if I don't see her before...* Their last meeting had been hard for her. He had tried to warn her, prepare her for what might happen. She had to realize.

"Is that working for you?"

Alex opened his eyes. The figure standing above him was surrounded by the intense glare of sunlight. He bent forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he rubbed his eyes.

"Alex, right? A friend asked me to give you a message."

He looked up realizing it was the kid from the club. He'd left his company at the table momentarily. Alex prepared himself for a threat of some kind.

"He wants to meet you in the rec room in an hour. Game of pool."

Alex stared up at him. "Pool?"

The raven-haired detainee nodded. "Just the messenger, man. Pool."

Another quick nod and he was back at the table. Alex wondered whose eye he had interested in his visits to the rec room. It could be one of three things: a brawl, a bang, or a buddy. The first two were more likely than the last. He had gotten familiar with the shorthand of the prisoners and cringed as he replayed the word *friend* in his mind.

The guards had been giving him looks of what amounted to pity all day. *More to do with Bree than me, I'm sure. They already know she's lost the fight.* Quietly, the door to the recreation area opened and Alex entered. There was quite a bit of activity this afternoon. The monitor was showing an old movie. It appeared old enough, in fact, to be confiscated. He smiled at the irony of a bootleg tape being shown in a detention center. The mouths of the prisoners released raucous laughter every few seconds. Almost everyone was seated in front of the screen. A few stragglers defiantly remained in the weight area. They had never been very social to Alex. *More interested in building those biceps.* His eyes made their way to the pool table in the corner. He held his breath, not wanting to see who was awaiting him.

The player hunched over the side of the table. A casual lean against his pool stick contrasted with the usual on-guard posture Alex kept. He watched as the friend got ready to break, resting the stick against the bridge of his fingers. He wasn't sure when exactly he knew who it was. But when he walked over the question came out familiar and relaxed.

"Started without me, Michael?"

The stick broke the well-formed triangular structure of pool balls and sank two. "Wasn't sure if you'd show."

"I didn't know who was waiting for me."

Michael motioned over to the other stick on the rack. "Probably won't need it. I'll be through in a few minutes."

Alex grinned. "Sure."

He glanced over at the guards and the other inmates. Everyone was suspiciously far enough out of range to hear the conversation.

"You plan this? Since when can you swing things like this?"

"A while."

"Should I even ask why you're here?"

"If you want to know." Michael grimaced, as the ball missed its destination.

Alex slid the stick up in one quick motion, bringing it down between the crook of his thumb and first finger. He wasted no time angling his shot. A quick jerk and the stick made contact with the cue ball as it sent another into the corner pocket.

"I do."

"I'm only in for a week. Petty theft."

"And why does theft only get *you* a week?"

"It does if the charges aren't pressed. Nothing the police can do except keep me a few days."

"What the hell were you doing stealing?"

"Well, as long as we're playing this game of 20 questions, what the hell were you doing fucking Samantha Dumas?"

Alex straightened up. "How'd you know that?"

Michael tapped his fingers against the table. "Your shot."

Alex's mouth felt dry. "Have you seen her?"

A short laugh escaped Michael. "That still all you can think about it? You're going under the knife tomorrow and you're worried about Sam?"

Alex assumed a stone-faced stare. "Have you seen her or not?"

"That's why I'm here. She's the one I stole from."

Alex edged over to Michael, pool stick firmly in hand. "Did you hurt her?"

"No. This was her idea. She told me about your surgery and we both agreed that you wouldn't be able to handle it. We put together this plan where I'd steal a couple hundred from her right under the nose of one of the dumb asses considered enforcers of the law. And here I am."

"You're here for emotional support?" Alex laughed and walked over to take his shot.

"You could say that. She thought I might be able to help you."

"There's nothing you can do."

"There might be."

"Did you ever think I might not be here at all if it wasn't for you?" Alex's anger released into his shot and misdirected pool balls cracked against each other.

"This should be good. How's it that I'm to blame for all this?"

Alex leaned in. "Just take your shot."

Michael grinned. "Sam thought you'd be happier to see me."

"None of this is her fault."

"If you say so. Why does she feel so guilty then?"

"Because she cares about me."

Michael took his shot and sighed as he missed. "I wouldn't be here either if I didn't. We both want to help."

Alex stood motionless. "How?"

"If you could get out..."

"There's no way."

"There might be. Would you be able to stay away from Sam if it were for your own good?"

He placed the stick on the table. "The only reason for me getting out is to be with Sam."

Michael nodded. "Even if that's what she wanted?"

"To not see me?"

"To get you out of here, help you put your life back together?"

"I'd need to see her, Michael."

"You know, what they say about time helping you forget...it's bullshit. But it does make things easier. It takes forever, sometimes, but it does."

"So why are you here if you're better off?"

"Because even after all the bullshit I know you don't deserve this. And I can help. We don't exactly have a lot of time. I need an answer."

"I wish I could talk to her."

"You don't need to talk to her. You already know she only wants the best for you. Just be prepared tonight. I'll handle the rest." He grabbed Alex's pool stick and handed it to him. "Now take your shot."

Alex wasn't sure what time it was when the guards came to get him. He hadn't been sleeping, but the wanderings of his mind made him lose track of time. The door opened with its vacuum popping sound and Alex sat up on the cot.

"Against the wall, Brennan."

He took his usual stance with his chest and hands pressed against the cold concrete. The shackles were placed on one, moving his arm around to his back as the other was forced to do the same. His heart pounded against the wall. The same procedure was done to his ankles. The guard turned him around to face her.

"You'll be sleeping in the infirmary tonight. You've got surgery bright and early tomorrow."

Alex nodded, wondering when he would know to take the opportunity Michael had alerted him about. The guard prodded him to walk ahead, gripping the chains. He heard another guard slam the door shut behind him and jumped.

"Easy."

Thoughts of lashing out filled him. But it wouldn't help. He would only succeed in making the situation worse. The walk was long. They went from one end of the center to the other. His small

steps did not help in the process. His breathing became heavy and his stomach began lurching. He knew he had entered the medical part of the building by the strong medicinal smell, similar to the scent of the fishbowl that disguised itself as the outdoor recreational area. A few guards looked up behind desks before buzzing them into the restricted patient area.

The room was filled with cubicles holding beds that had inmates in them. They all looked doped into unconsciousness. Many of them had muzzles over their mouths. The ones who didn't have them were unable to speak. He had expected this, but it was still unnerving. The bizarre scene caused him to shudder, especially when he realized he would be outfitted with one of those masks, too. His bed was at the end of the room, stuffed into a corner. The soft lights shone against the white of the sheets and the walls hurting his eyes.

"Have a seat."

Alex did as instructed and flopped on the bed. One guard firmly held his arms as the other gripped his feet. One hand shackle was released and attached to his bedpost. He felt his body pulled down as both feet were locked to the bottom rails.

"The nurse will be along later with a sedative." The guard pulled out a muzzle. "It's the easy way or the hard way, Brennan. The choice is yours."

Alex stared at the partition for a few seconds before acquiescing. The leather and metal of the muzzle covered the bottom of his face. He heard the snaps connect. He had no choice but to breathe in the rancid smell. If he vomited there was nowhere for it to go but back into his mouth or plastered around his chin. He felt himself lurch. The guard took his other hand and shackled it to the bedpost. Alex's head began to spin as one guard turned to the other.

"He may need a shot right away. Tell her to take a look at him."

Alex began thrashing. He screamed through the muzzle, bouncing muffled cries off the walls. His rational thoughts repeated there was no point, no one would do anything. But he continued, his body leaping up, crashing back down. He moved from side to side. The bed creaked beneath him.

Moments later a nurse was at his side. "I need you two to hold him."

He struggled against their grip and felt a pinch in his neck. It took a minute before his body relaxed and he felt his mind drift away.

"Alex?"

He heard the familiar voice, opened his eyes, and saw her silhouette.

"Sam?" he mumbled, hearing it in his mind as he felt the tight muzzle around him.

It was dark. His eyes blinked heavily. He was able to make out the soft contours of her face. Just a dim light framed her body from behind.

Dreaming. He closed his eyes.

"Oh, Alex, I'm so sorry."

He felt her lips against his forehead. He felt her hair fall around him, took in her scent. He heard soft snaps. His eyes blinked open and he fought against the stupor of the anesthetic.

"You have to be quiet." Whispers filled his ears. "I shouldn't be here. Bree got me in. I had to talk to you before..."

Her whispers stopped. He felt the muzzle lift off his face. His cheek brushed against her fingers. She brought her lips to his. He yanked on the shackles. He moaned, desperate to get free.

"Sh." She brought her fingers to his lips and he kissed them. "I never thought I'd touch you again. I can't stay long."

He lifted his head up off the bed. "I'm so glad you're here. I'm going to get out of here. Michael's going to get me out. It's because of you."

"You saw him?" Sam smiled. "I hope he can. Not much time left."

"He will."

"The only way to be safe is to get as far away from all of this and all of us."

"I can't stay away from you."

Sam smiled. "Not forever. But for a while."

"How long?"

"I don't know. No one else knows about this. Not Cil, Bree, anyone."

"I don't want anyone else. I know what you're doing, bringing Michael into this. You think I'll forget about us. You think I'll go back with him."

"I want what's best for you."

"No one else can be as good for me as you."

"Then, no matter what happens, I'll wait for you." Sam smiled. "But you have to promise if...when... you get out to wait before trying to find me."

Alex nodded. "I promise."

She held him for a few more minutes, listening to his breathing.

"Sam?"

"Yes."

"I want you."

She lifted her head up. The shadows played across his face. Her heart pounded and she could feel her body arouse after hearing those three words.

"We can't. You're..." Her eyes ran up to his hands. "We're not alone. Someone will see or hear."

"Do you love me?"

"You know I do. We don't have to prove that."

"Sam, we may not have another chance."

She could feel his chest hitch under her and the dampness of his tears. "I want to."

Her lips found his. She felt the softness of his lips, moaning as he prodded her mouth open with his tongue. He tasted her slowly. Her fingers went to his neck, snaking behind to cradle his head.

"Take off your clothes." He whispered between kisses. "Let me see you."

She shuddered in excitement and fear. "I'd do it for you, but..."

He rattled the restraints against the bed rails. "Please, Sam."

She looked around the small space. "Cameras?"

"Not in here." A smile crossed his lips. "I think you would have been caught."

"The others?"

"How awake did they look when you came in?"

Sitting on the side of the bed she shrugged out of her jacket, unbuttoning the top of her blouse. *Silk.* Everything else fell away from his mind. All he thought of was her, feeling her again. She pulled his shirt up, undoing the belt. Her nails buried under the elastic of his boxers and stripped him down to his knees. He held his breath, watching her. She stood up. Her shoes scuffed against the marble floor as they slipped off her bare feet. Her hands disappeared under the hem of her skirt, rising it up below her hips.

"Slow."

Sam's eyes smiled at him as she pulled down her panties. The skirt fell back into place. She crawled on top of him, straddling his body. He felt her thighs grip his chest. Her most private parts brushed against his stomach and his excitement mounted.

"I want to remember how this feels." The whisper sighed out of him.

Sam's hands caressed the skin beneath his shirt. Her nails dragged over him and she felt him react. His chest arched. Sam hid her need to cry out. What seemed like arousal to Alex as she shivered was her body wanting desperately to release the sadness inside her. The thought that it was her last time with him was excruciating. She trembled with fear, the thought of being caught in front of her mind. Bree was outside the infirmary, pacing back and forth. The guard had given her an hour to visit her client once enough money passed between them. The time was passing.

"Nice," Alex whispered.

Sam smiled. She bent down to kiss his lips, covering his body with hers. She unbuttoned the rest of her shirt, pressing her chest to him. He moaned into her mouth. Sitting up, she maneuvered above him. Slowly, she let him enter her. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the feel of him and listened to his breathing quicken. He held back as long as he could.

Sam dressed quickly, fumbling as she tried dressed him simultaneously. It had gotten darker inside the confined space and Sam squinted as she tried to straighten her clothes.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me." She kissed him.

"You have to go?"

"I wish I could stay."

"Do me a favor? I think there's a small light by the bed. Would you turn it on?"

"What if someone..."

"Just for a minute."

Her hands felt the table top next to the bed. Inching up she found the switch and turned it on. A soft glow illuminated his body. She cringed at the light as her eyes adjusted. Alex stared at her.

"You've been crying."

Sam buttoned the top of her blouse. "Why does everything have to be so hard? What did we do that was so wrong?" She felt for the jacket on the floor.

"There's one more thing you have to do." He motioned to the table with his head.

"Oh." She had forgotten about the horrendous shackle. "I don't..."

"I know, but you have to."

Sam sighed. "I just want to look at you longer."

Alex smiled as Sam's hand went to his face. She started at his brow, stroking his forehead with the tips of her fingers. Moving to the side of his face she traveled down to his cheekbone. Caressing him she wished that somehow the walls would disappear, everything around them would fade away and it would just be the two of them. Together. Perfect.

"It's time."

Sam regretfully agreed and grabbed the muzzle. "Try not to worry. I love you."

Alex broke down hearing those words. "I love you, too."

He returned her kiss, shaking. Her hand cradled his head and she felt his quiet trembles against her own. His lips brushed against her mouth as he spoke.

"Always remember that."

Sam nodded, feeling her cries rise into her throat. "I will."

Satisfied, he leaned back. His tears made their way down the sides of his face. She wiped them away and turned off the light. All that remained was the shadow playing against the contours of his face. She bit her lip as she placed the muzzle over his face and felt for the snaps. With jacket in hand she stood up and gave him one final kiss on his forehead.

"No matter what."

The softness of her lips left him. He watched her walk out of the enclosed area. Her shadow was the last thing he saw of her. It floated over the entrance door. He laid awake, concentrating on the smell of her. He still felt her lips on his into the early morning hours.

Chapter 49

~ Escapes ~

He somehow drifted off to sleep. Perhaps it was the unbearable anxiety taking its toll on him, forcing him into unconsciousness. Perhaps the drugs in his system had finally won the battle. Perhaps the contentment of being with Sam again had filled his mind with an ease he had not felt in months. Whatever, in those few moments he let his defenses down. Just long enough. The needle entered his arm. His groggy state only allowed him to moan in opposition.

"Everything will be fine. We're going to prep you for surgery." The haze his eyes peered through recognized the nurse. "This will help you relax."

He shook his head. If the nurse had listened, she would have heard 'No' in the middle of the sounds escaping his mouth. He cried, struggling against the quickness of the anesthetic. When he awoke he was surrounded by blackness. His eyes squinted lazily as his head rolled back and forth, moving with an unfamiliar rhythm under him. He felt his body bump up and had no way of controlling himself.

"He's awake."

Alex tried to place the voice.

"They filled him with a ton of shit. He's finally coming out of it."

The voices were above him. He attempted to open his mouth to speak.

"Take it easy, Alex."

Michael. He felt himself black out.

Sam sat in expectation by the computer waiting for the message. *You should hear from me by Saturday morning.* Their conversation before Michael had raced down the street after the 'assault' passed through her memory. *If everything goes as planned. But don't worry if it takes longer for me to get in touch with you. We need to put as much distance between us and Vegas as possible.*

The monitor was tuned in to the news channel for the majority of the day. She expected to see something about an escape some indication that they had been successful.

Don't put too much faith in whatever you see on the news. Anything that happens to cast a negative light on the police is probably not going to make it on anyway.

Yes, but a bunch of convicted criminals escaping...

If we play our cards right that won't be the big story.

She wasn't sure what he meant by all the cryptic responses over a handful of days. One request had given her pause.

Can I get a copy of the surveillance video?

What?

The video of Alex and Ri that night in Vegas.

Why do you need that?

The less you know the better, in case you get questioned.

But Michael...

Sam, do you want him to be rid of all of this?

That was all she needed to hear. She made a copy and gave it to him, no more questions asked.

A message alert buzzed onto the computer screen. Sam jumped, full of hope and doubt all at the same time. The addressee was untraceable and the message simply read, 'Heading south. M'.

Sam sighed. It was all she would receive. They couldn't risk further contact. It would be up to Alex. She knew it would be a long wait, but she reveled in the fact that he was out.

"News from the Nevada State Detention Center has just come in to our studio. Accused and set to be tried on the charges of physical and sexual assault on Alex Brennan died early this morning due to complications of elected castration surgery."

Had Sam heard the news a minute earlier, her reaction would have been desperation and disbelief. Now however, it was a vindication. It worked. They were hiding the fact that he got out.

"Our studio was made aware of this incident just as we received video of the startling altercation from an anonymous source. The following events occurred in June of this year at the Vinto Gallery in Las Vegas. The audio portion also alludes to what appears to be some type of illegal operation on the part of Vinto, Inc. Though not confirmed, our source has told us of an alleged underground business in which the sexual services with ops were exchanged for a monetary fee. This video contains additional material supposedly deleted by Vinto, Inc. before its distribution to news stations. We feel we should advise our viewers that the following video is violent and sexually graphic. If you are offended or disgusted by such acts, please do not watch."

You did it Michael. Sam watched Alex sitting on a chair looking distracted. Ri was annoyed. The audio was very faint.

'Is it really so important that you have to see her right now?'

'I don't have to see her right now, Ri, but I would like to see her some time tonight.'

'It'd be a lot easier for everyone if you just suited up and headed down to the club.'

'I'm not working tonight. I'm here to see my mother. That's it.'

She heard Cil and Sid mentioned in the conversation. It would mean the end of any connection they had to Vinto. Their banter continued and Alex became angry at the mention of his father. Any sympathy Ri might have received before would soon be replaced with disgust and repulsion by the community that cared for her. She'll be ousted just like Cil... and me.

'You have no reason, or right, to talk about my father. You know what I think it is. I'm exactly what you want. A constant reminder of something you would like to have, but can't.'

Sam smiled, imagining Ri screaming at the top of her lungs at the images on the screen.

'Please.'

'You mean you haven't heard the rumors? What the other ops say about you? How obvious it is? I mean... why would a person spend so much time around things she hates. The money's good, I'll give you that, but... after a while, don't you have to stop lying to yourself and admit the real reason behind all this.'

Though viewers would not know it was a stun gun, they would see Ri using some type of device held tightly against his neck. Sam winced as his body went into spasms. Ri stood over him, smiling, enjoying the show. A minute passed and she was feeling inside his pants. She stroked him before taking him into her mouth. He tried to get up and she stunned him. It was over quickly. She talked on

as she sat back down, burying herself and Vinto.

'But without it, you wouldn't bring in any money for Vinto. And you are one of our best products.'

It wasn't long before Alex attacked. Everyone in the country had become familiar with this scene, only now they could hear it. Sam realized, thankfully, that Michael had edited out the last part where Sam's name was mentioned. *He could have kept that in to implicate me as well.*

Sam had hope again. It didn't take long before Bree called. Sam did her best to appear shaken, surprising even herself. She told Bree she'd head back to Verona as soon as possible. The ruse wouldn't hold up for long and she had no idea how well her performance would go over in person.

Booking a flight to Florida, her thoughts filled with Alex. The wish that he was safe and able to start over made up for the loneliness she felt for so long. Even the conclusion that she may not be a part of his life was easier to take knowing he was free. Every link to his past was broken. He would be the one to decide which would be put back together again. Imagining him sitting in a hotel room with a soft smile on his face caused her to smile as well. She had done what she could. He had done the same for her and she was grateful. She did not contact Cil or Sid. They could find out from Bree where she had gone if they needed her.

As the plane took off she finally took the time to think. Alex had become her primary focus of her life over the past year and now that he was piecing his together she would have to do the same. A decision was made not to return to the Verona Arts Preservation Society. Aggie, in her unending hopefulness, would more than likely still hold a spot for her. She wanted nothing more to do with the people that had populated her life before Alex. There was no need for it. It would also mean not reconciling with Cat. It would be too easy to revert back to her old life. Alex had shown her risk had its benefits, though consequences always followed closely behind. The soft cushions of clouds beneath relaxed her into sleep. For the first time in months, she slept peacefully.

Chapter 50

~ Truths ~

"Europe?" Aggie sat on the opposite end of the table facing Sam. "But you just got back from God knows where."

"Thought you didn't believe in God, Aggie?"

She brushed the comment aside with her hand. "You invite me to lunch and hit me with the news that you're selling your mother's home. You tell me you won't be coming back to VAPS and now you're moving to Europe?"

Sam squinted as she made a mental calculation. "Yes, that sounds about right."

"What's happened to you?"

"I'm ready to move on, that's all. There's nothing for me here. It's taken me a while to realize that, but I finally have."

"But the memories of your mother."

"Are just memories. I'll have them wherever I am."

Aggie's lips quivered. "I didn't want to believe the things I heard."

Sam sighed. "You and Cat and everyone else can spend the rest of your lives discussing how my untimely demise will come about. Until that happens I plan on living."

"Nothing good can come of this. I don't want to see your mother's house go to a stranger."

"Any suggestions on who to sell it to?"

"I've always had a fondness for that house."

The door to the house squeaked open. Sam cringed, realizing she would need to do some work on a few trouble spots before having the realtor look at it. Unless Aggie was serious about her offer. Plopping her purse on the coffee table she checked her mail for messages. A letter from Cat, on tour yet again, was put in a folder. She had not opened anything from her since their confrontation. A message from Cil blinked on the screen. The figure of Cil sitting behind her desk looked haggard and worn. There were no extravagant costumes or the usual fastidiousness.

"I know I'm probably the last person you want to see." She looked down at the desktop. "I have no right to, but I really need to see you Sammy. I want to give you some of Alex's things. I think he would like you to have them. I'm coming to Verona this weekend. If you want to see me I'll be at the Monta. Take care."

The hotel clerk provided Sam with directions to Cil's suite. Sam had been at a loss when she entered the grand hotel. It encompassed an entire city block and loomed higher than most of the other towering architectural features in the downtown district of Verona. It took her mind off the anxiety she felt as she followed the complicated route through the maze of hallways. Several stories later she found the room and tapped on the door. Sam heard scuffling and then the unlocking of the door.

Cil peered behind the door. Sam couldn't help but smile at the unusual awkwardness. The smile faded as she noticed the deep lines in her face. The usual healthy tone of her skin was replaced with a sallow, dull texture. Had it only been a few weeks since she'd seen her?

"Hello, Sammy."

"Hi, Cil."

"Come in, please."

"Thanks."

Sam walked past her. Their relationship had become stressed and uncomfortable. She figured Cil was probably hurt by the lack of comfort she would have normally given her, but she did not want to give in, not yet. The room was spacious, sparsely decorated. Beautiful paintings lined the walls. Doorways led to rooms on either side. Sam peered in before sitting on the couch. Cil remained standing.

"Can I get you something?"

"I wasn't planning on staying long. How..." Sam cleared her throat. "How are you?"

Cil shrugged. "As well as can be expected. We had a service for Alex last week. It was hard for everyone. Especially the way the state handled everything. I couldn't even claim his remains. He didn't have any rights...even after he died."

Sam watched Cil trail off in thought. "Is Sid alright?"

"Yes. He told me to tell you he misses you and that he wishes things could have been different for you and Alex."

"Thank him for me and tell him I miss him, too."

"I will." Cil paced back and forth.

"Maybe you should sit down, Cil."

"No. When I sit I have time to think. If I sit I won't go through with this."

She walked to the side of the room, bringing out a bag and extending it to Sam. "His things. I thought you should have..."

Sam's eyes filled as she rested the bag next to her on the couch. "Thank you."

"Oh, Sam, I don't know where to begin."

"There isn't anything else to say." She wiped the tears from her face.

"I should have told you about Alex a long time ago. It might have made a difference."

"There's no point in doing this to either of us."

"I've..." She clutched her chest. "I've carried this in me for so long. So did Sarah. We did what we thought was right. I didn't do right by Alex. I never did. But I don't think I ever felt the guilt the way Sarah did, until now."

Sam shook her head. "Why would my mother feel guilty about any of this?"

Cil walked to the fireplace and rested her palms against the ledge. "Do you know how Sarah and I met?"

Sam hesitated. "In school?"

"Yes, school. We never did tell you what kind, did we? We were sent to a special boarding school at the age of 12. When it was found out that we were both viable."

Sam's head jerked up sharply. "What?"

"We were sent to a government school set up to provide an education and suitable living for girls who were found to be viable. Back then it wasn't as enforced as it was now."

"Mom couldn't have children, Cil."

Cil turned around, tears in her eyes. "Yes, she could. We both could. We did what we had to do for the," she laughed and brought up one hand with a flourish, "for the good of humanity."

Sam felt herself disconnecting from her body. "Why should I believe anything you say? It's all been lies. This is just one more."

"I wish it was. Our lives would be so much different. We'd been brainwashed about how wonderful it was to be a part of something so miraculous. We did our patriotic duty and believed all of it faithfully. But then it wasn't enough. We had both had a child and had given it up for others to love. We were 16 when we left."

Cil recounted the past as Sam struggled to understand.

"We helped each other get through school. Sarah did so much better than I did. I knew she would make a way for herself. She accepted me when I told her I was attracted to males. I'd never felt as close to a person as I did to her. I knew I could trust her with my life. She helped me meet Ryan and my life felt right. But I could always tell there was something missing. She regretted giving up her baby much more than I did and wanted to have another. Ryan had a friend, a really nice guy. Nick was an amazing physical specimen. Sarah and I both thought his genes would be perfect to pass onto a child. He obliged willingly and donated what Sarah needed. Sarah tried her hand at insemination with the help of underground doctors. Before we knew it, she was pregnant. And then I followed right behind her."

"We didn't follow the rules, Sam, and there were problems."

"You mean, I wasn't adopted? I was really my mother's child?"

Cil sighed, sitting on the chair. "No."

"No?" Sam's voice was desperate. "Will you please stop talking in riddles."

"We made a pact to always be there for each other. Sarah found out..." Cil began crying.

Sam walked over to Cil and rested her hands on her knee. "What? What did she find out?"

"She found out she was going to have a boy."

"A boy?" Sam lost the connection immediately. "A boy?"

"When I found out I was pregnant with a girl the only logical thing to do for our children was make sure they thrived in this society."

Sam looked into Cil's eyes and saw that familiarity she had so often seen when growing up. She had believed it was because her mother's best friend had always been a part of her life. Now she clearly saw it was a reflection of herself. Sam fell back on the rug, disoriented and dazed. Her arms went limp and dropped in her lap as she looked up at Cil.

Cil hung her head. "We did what we thought was best for both of you. Ryan was so against it for the longest time. He knew it made sense, but he didn't want to give up."

"His daughter." Sam nodded.

"He was there for the delivery and held you right after you were born. Alex was three months old. I remember he had Alex in one arm and you in the other. And he just cried. He watched Alex play with your feet when you cried." Cil laughed recalling the memory. "He loved you both. All the love he felt for you he gave to Alex, unconditionally. He never saw you again. It was too dangerous once Sarah started her life in the world. Alex was given the sign of true conception to protect him from questions."

You weren't given it for the same reasons.

"All of this...all of the lies...it became so hard. Ryan couldn't deal with it for long. That's one of the reasons why he left. I always felt I had the best deal out of all of us. I could move between one world and the other. I could see you. I could be with my daughter even if I couldn't tell you. I could watch you grow up. Sarah was never able to do that. When she found out she was sick she had to find a way to contact Alex. She wanted to see him so badly before it was too late. I helped her find him in Vancouver. She got to see what a wonderful man he was. She was grateful that she got the chance to be with him. He let her watch him sleep that night, thinking it was some weird request from a woman who had a thing for young men. He had no idea she was his mother who had missed thousands of bedtimes with him."

Cil broke down, crying. Sam felt the strength return to her body. Her mind was able to reconnect with her physical flesh and she brought herself up to the side of Cil's chair, hovering above her crumpled frame.

"I would have never been able to tell Alex. He had been denied so much. But I wanted to tell you after Sarah passed. I thought it would help in some way to know you hadn't lost everything."

"You should have told him. He had the right to know. So did I. It doesn't change the fact that we both had mothers who loved us."

"You're right."

"What did you hope to prove with this?"

Cil looked up at Sam. "I...Sam..."

"No, Cil, I can't pretend this will somehow make everything alright."

"I just wanted you to finally know everything."

"And this is everything?"

Cil nodded.

"Thank you for doing what you thought was best for me. I need to go."

Sam got up and hurried for the door. She could hear Cil hurry after her. She turned, expecting pleas to stay. Instead, she saw Cil holding Alex's bag out to her.

"You forgot this." Cil smiled sadly.

Their fingers brushed against each other. Sam threw her arms around her. She felt Cil's slender fingers and soft hands grip her back.

"You take care of yourself, my Sammy."

"I will. You too."

"I'm the last one anyone needs to worry about. Or did you forget that?" Cil pulled away, wiping the tears off of Sam's face. "I wish I could have done more for you and Alex. I'm sorry I was so angry. I just didn't want you to make my mistakes."

"Kind of unavoidable."

"Yes, I guess it was."

"Take care of Sid."

"Always. He's all I have left."

That was true. No more needed to be said. Sam turned and headed out the door.

"I wish you'd told me, Mom." Sam stood in front of Sarah's crypt. "I wouldn't have loved you any less. I know you would be happy to see Alex and I together. He's so special, like you."

Sam let out another cry. She had been doing nothing but that since leaving Cil's hotel room. She didn't even remember driving herself here. When the engine was turned off she was in the cemetery. Fall was making itself known. The lush green had dulled and the wind had some bite to it. Sam began rocking on her heels, tugging on the ends of her shoulder length hair.

"It's no wonder I fell in love with him now that I think about it. He filled the space that you left so perfectly. He was a part of you."

A woman emerged from the hallway, walking slowly. Sam smiled politely as she passed. The woman looked around. Soon she left Sam alone.

"What a mess I am. I was going to come and see you before I left, but now I don't think I will. This will have to be enough. I did tell you I was leaving, didn't I? I don't know if I'll actually meet up with Alex. He needs time to figure out what's best for him. I think the best thing for me is to go back to where I was happiest. I'm heading for Padua, see if Mira and Ajit could use someone to bother them. Maybe I'll get my job back from Liselle." She leaned against the granite. "I wish Alex had gotten to know you better. I still don't know if I should find a way to tell him. What good will it do him now? What good has it done me? I'm still in the same place I was before Cil told me. It certainly hasn't made anything easier. It's just given me more to think about. He has enough to think about for now. Do you think he'll contact Cil?" She waited, listening. "You're right. He's ready to finally break free completely. Oh, Mom, you have no idea how much I want to be able to do that with him. It hurts so much sometimes. Did you ever have that kind of pain? That hunger? I got that small taste of him and I don't know if I can live without it." She sighed. "I guess we'll see. Keep an eye out for him. And me." She kissed the capital 'S' on the cold stone one final time with the tip of her finger. "Bye, Mom."

She got home that night to find a large package by her front door, wrapped in plain brown paper. She clutched it by its sides, kicking the door open. With hers and Alex's bag draped over her shoulder she walked into the living room resting the package against the back of the couch. There was no address or postage markings on its wrapping. All that was attached was a note in Cil's identifiable scrawl: *Too hard for me to keep.*

Puzzled, Sam away the paper. She recognized her work immediately as the corner was revealed. The rest of the paper was removed presenting Sam with the painting she had made for Cil enclosed in a protective frame. Alex stared back at her. She was still amazed at how strikingly similar the creation was to reality. Alex's voice drifted into her thoughts. *Well, it certainly looks like me. Minus the wings, of course.* Sam smiled. *This one is coming with me. I need my angel to watch over me.*

She went over to Alex's bag. She rifled through it, pulling out his artwork. *Need to take care of these.* She laid them on the table, thinking of the portfolio she had upstairs. She pulled out plastic bags and gazed at the confiscated items. The clothes he had been wearing the day he was arrested in Rome were in one. She pressed her fingers against the plastic, not wanting to open it just yet. *It'll smell like him.*

Her heart sank when she looked in the other bag. *Mom's locket.* Her fingers trembled as she pulled it out by its long chain. She let it dangle from her fingers, swaying back and forth. *I wonder if he misses it.* She fingered through the pieces of artwork, finding the sketch of the locket and placed it on top. Meticulously, she arranged the chain so it was in the same position as the sketch. Her fingers came to her lips as her eyes darted from sketch to locket. It solidified her view about how proficient he had become in such a short amount of time. *Mom's eye for detail.*

The other item in the bag intrigued Sam. It was a small statue of an angel surrounded by ripped and crumpled pieces of tissue paper. *Police had to inspect everything.* The statue reminded her of the one she had looked at when she and Alex had first arrived in Rome. She recalled his promise. *I'll get you as many angels as you want once we get it together.* She turned the bag over in her hands, admiring his last gift. *No more crying.* She noticed a small envelope attached to the bottom of the statue. She detached the note from its base and prepared herself emotionally. Two words were all that had been written.

Thank You.

Sam folded the note and placed it back into its envelope.

Chapter 51

~ Time ~

Several months passed before Sam finally made her way back to Padua. It had remained the same. Mira welcomed her warmly and Ajit was pleased she had returned. Little was said of Alex and that was how Sam wanted it. A few condolences were all Sam could handle. Ajit's troubled features were more than she could bear. She found the idea of lying to him very hard.

Though Mira offered the room where Alex and Sam had stayed, Sam refused. Her plan was to find an apartment in the city to rent. In her mind, nothing would be permanent. At least not until she heard from Alex. Liselle had been happy to reinstate Sam in her position as the refurbisher of her modest shop. Sam did not need the income since selling the home in Florida to Aggie. But it gave her something to focus on, something to help her get through the agony of waiting.

I'm almost through.

Ajit was setting up a furniture display for Mira. Sam snuck into the shop after the 'Closed' sign was put on the door.

"Good, don't want to miss the start of the play."

Mira's not coming. She got a killer headache right after lunch.

Sam frowned. "Where is she?"

Resting in her room.

Sam tapped on the mahogany door. "Mira?"

"Oh, Sam, come in." She heard the moan and entered.

"Another one, huh?"

Only a candle on the dresser illuminated the bedroom. Mira sat up in bed pressing the compress to her head.

"Yes." Mira sighed. "Sorry I can't come along."

Sam sat on the side of the bed. "Shouldn't you see a doctor?"

"I'll be fine by tomorrow morning."

"Do you need anything?"

She shook her head, lying back down. "How are things with you?"

"Fine."

"Vanishing act going well, then."

Sam smiled. "I guess."

"I did the same thing when I finally left Vinto. Disappeared all by myself, without a trace."

Sam cocked her head. "Why did you?"

"Oh, so many reasons. I couldn't pick just one. I think mainly," she grimaced, "it was all the lies. You can only be around that for so long until it eats away at you."

"You loved Cil and Alex a lot, though."

"Absolutely. That was one of the reasons I had to leave."

Sam shook her head. "I don't..."

"I wish I could tell you the whole story. Even now, with all that's happened, there's still so much you don't know."

Sam nodded. "You mean about Cil being my birth mother?"

Mira's eyes shot open. "Who?"

"Cil, the last time I saw her in Florida."

"Oh, my God." She held her chest. "I thought she never would."

There was a knock at the door and Sam turned to see Ajit in the doorway. "Jit, think maybe we could do the play another night? Keep Mira some company?"

Ajit smiled and nodded. *I'll see if there's some soup.*

When Sam turned back, Mira was sitting up. "You two don't have to."

"I think this drama you're about to tell me will be much more interesting."

Be back with dinner. Ajit lumbered off in his work boots.

"So." Sam noted the small smile forming on Mira's face. "Tell."

"I found out about Alex being Sarah's son when he was about nine. An accidental slip on Cil's part. When that happened I knew she'd made herself and Alex vulnerable."

"Why vulnerable?"

"You've seen what they're capable of. If Vinto had found out about the façade—their lives...yours... your mother's—they would've been destroyed. No one gets away with something like that. So, I left to make sure I would never betray them by giving away that secret."

"Did she ever say why she did it?"

Mira smiled. "I'm sure she told you all that when she finally told you the truth."

Sam sighed. "That it was for the best because they loved us. But it makes everything in the past seem so false, like there was a calculated motive behind all of it. My memories now, they're tainted, knowing the truth."

"Their motive was their love for both of you. There can't be anything calculated about that. Love is the last thing anyone can predict or control." She grabbed Sam's hand. "Let it taint your memories with a clearer understanding of their love for you and Alex."

Sam smiled. "I really wish that didn't make any sense."

"You and your grudges. You are your mother's daughter."

Mira squealed, "Don't make me do that."

"Sorry." Sam's eyes filled with hope. "Did you ever meet Ryan?"

"No. I started working under Cil after Ryan was gone. But, I have a picture of him."

"You do?"

She pointed to the dresser. "That book there. Open it to the first page."

Sam did. Her heart pounded, staring at the picture under the candlelight. He was a rock of a man,

sturdy and strong. A foot taller than Cil, who's arms draped tightly about his waist, while he clung to her shoulder. She noted the hopeful smile on his face, the big blue eyes staring solidly into the camera. In the crook of his other arm was Alex. Sam sighed, holding back the lump in her throat. The boy, not much older than three, was caught in mid-laugh, messing with his father's brown, curly hair.

"A family." Sam ran her finger over the photo.

"Yes, just like the one on the next page."

She turned the page and laughed immediately. "Mira, how did you get this?"

"Who else?"

She shook her head and stared at the picture of Sarah. She knelt beside Sam, who was around three, standing in front of an easel covered in paint. Cil sat in a chair on the opposite side, looking at the scene in amusement.

"See. A family with beautiful memories." She looked up to see Mira's eyes fill with tears. "Just like the ones you and Alex will make together."

Ajit walked Sam back to her apartment after they'd a chicken noodle soup dinner with Mira.

"You didn't know, did you?"

Of course not.

"I just thought mother might have told you considering you were so close."

No. Ajit's head was still shaking from the news of Sam's real parents.

"Did you ever wonder about yours?"

Mine came from the same lab thousands of others did.

"You know what I mean. The donors that helped to conceive you?"

Ajit shook his head.

"I never did either."

You should feel lucky.

"How's that?"

You knew one of your true birth parents. Not many can say that.

"I guess."

Did Alex know?

Sam shook her head.

Ajit nodded. *I'm sure he would have tried to find Sarah if he had been told.*

"You think so?"

I would have. Its no wonder Sarah was so good to me. She was making up for a lot.

"Yeah."

Ajit leaned against the rail of Sam's balcony. They were taking in the view of the small city as it began to retire. The sky hung above heavily in shades of pink and purple. A few stars began to shimmer in the clear expanse above them. The beautiful countryside framed the man-made architecture in the distance.

It's a beautiful sight. How much again?

"Too much." Sam grinned. "But it's not forever so I thought why not?"

You're thinking of leaving already?

"Not yet, but eventually."

You never used to be so anxious. Do you know what you are going to do when you leave?

"Not a clue." They both laughed.

The Sam I knew always needed a set plan before doing anything.

Sam watched the bustle below. "If I can't control the way things end up I'm not going to worry about it."

It will get better, Sam.

She smiled at his eagerness to console her. "I know."

Sam came into the shop, shivering. The remains of her lunch were in a small bag.

"Getting that bad?"

"Just not used to the temperature. Southern climate, remember?"

Liselle nodded. She rummaged behind the counter. "You got a letter." Her hand emerged from behind the countertop. "Oh, Anna says your Italian has gotten better."

"Well, the curses are easy."

Sam headed into the backroom to resume her work. She shrugged out of the coat and looked at the letter. The last few correspondences she had received had been from past customers. They had bestowed compliments and gratitude for the work she had done to revive treasured artwork. Many had been pieces of art handed down through generations. Her ability to bring the beauty and memories back to others pleased her tremendously. Sam sat at her desk opening the letter. Her arms fell limp against the desktop and her eyes traveled down to the end of the page. Her pulse quickened as she read.

Sam,

I finally tracked you down. Michael helped to get your exact location. I had a feeling you would go back to Padua. I hope you are well and have started to put your new life together.

I wasn't sure where to start. I know however I tell you this, it will be painful for both of us.

When I finally got into Mexico, I realized how impossible this all was. It took me a long time to admit to myself how much better off you will be without me. There is no way I can give you all that you deserve. You have to believe me on this. I hope that you will be able to accept this soon.

I wish it could be different, but there's no way we can go back to how it was. Too much has happened that can never be fixed.

Please, don't be angry. The hardest thing for me would be to know you are angry with me.

Remember, I do love you and I would never hurt you this way unless I knew it was the best thing for both of us. I know it makes no sense. It doesn't to me either, but it has to be like this. It's the only way I think you will eventually find true happiness.

I thank you for everything. I will never forget what you've done for me. You helped me realize and experience so much. I will never forget.

Alex

Her hands shook. Denial rushed through her. She grabbed the envelope. The postmark read Vienna. Vienna. With Michael. She closed her eyes, clutching the note. She was willing to accept the defeat, but not the reason. The letter was hiding the real reason. It was obvious that Alex had found a comfortable existence. With Michael.

The festival parade marched beneath Sam's balcony. She sat listening to the news on the radio as her coffee was sipped. The band's crescendos overpowered the radio reception. Sam, however, did not notice. Her thoughts were preoccupied with the letter. What had changed? Maybe he'd rushed to this decision. He could always change his mind. She decided to wait for him. Give him time. She could do that.

I have plenty of time.

Chapter 52

~ Acceptance ~

Sam's hopes of further contact from Alex diminished as the months passed. She fell into a routine as her life continued without him. Her passion and enthusiasm shrank along with that anticipation. It wasn't necessarily depression. It was acceptance. Without Alex it would be no different than how she had existed in Verona. The mask returned, hiding her pain and loneliness.

The months crept by and formed a year. During that time much had transpired back in the States, the most important being the destruction of Vinto, Inc. Mira kept her informed faithfully. The outing of the underground op gallery had completely discredited any legal activity by the company. The announcement of bankruptcy due to numerous costly stock pullouts followed federal charges. The company was in the midst of turmoil that its founders would never recover from, no matter how much time and money washed over it.

Cil had made her way out of the States, however no one was sure where. No one was sure if Sid had followed either. Sam received a note from him a few months following Alex's. In it he expressed regret and sadness over the events that had occurred. Sam read through the lines and picked up on the fondness Sid had acquired for her. He had not included a return address and stated he would not be in touch for a while.

Good things had happened over the year as well. Ajit made a conquest of his own. Sam had invited a young Italian woman by the name of Theresa to their 'family' Sunday dinner when it was obvious Ajit had become smitten. The patron of Mira's shop eventually ended up quite close to Ajit. Enough, in fact, that Ajit moved into an apartment with her a few months after their initial meeting. Everything fell into place around Sam. Things had turned out the way they should for everyone...except her.

"Will you close up for me? I'm already late." Liselle made a mad dash for the door.

Sam nodded, smiling. "Have a nice night."

"You too, dear." The door chimed, confirming her exit.

Sam locked up and dimmed the lights before making her way to her workspace to finish her assignment. She had no sooner sat in front of the painting when she heard a light tapping at the door. She called out to the late patron.

"E chiuso."

The tapping continued. She sighed and reluctantly got up. Sam stood in the middle of the doorway between the shop and the backroom. Hid in the shadows, she checked out the figure. It was impossible to discern anything but that the person was dark and male. She turned on the lights in the shop and the form was revealed. He motioned for her to open up. Sam stared dumbfounded.

"I need to talk to you." Michael tapped on the door.

Her eyes blinked rapidly at him as she stood on the opposite side of the door.

"Are you going to open it or do I have to talk to you through this?"

His comment helped spur her into action. She opened up and walked out onto the sidewalk to meet him.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Alright." Sam folded her arms, feeling the chill air wrap around her. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you before I headed back to the states. See how you were."

"You're going back?"

Michael nodded.

Sam swallowed hard. "Alex too?"

He shook his head.

"How is he?"

"Don't really know. Haven't seen him in almost a year. We parted ways after I tracked you down. Just been bumming around Europe since."

"But I thought..."

"You thought we were together?" Michael sighed. "It took me a while to figure out what the right thing to do was." Michael bundled himself against the wind. "He wanted to be alone where he wouldn't hurt anyone anymore." Michael swayed back and forth on his heels. "I call him off and on to check how he is. He needs you, Sam. But he's afraid you won't want him anymore, that it's too late and you've moved on."

Sam stared down at the cobble streets and shook her head. "How could he ever think that?"

"That's something you need to ask him." Michael pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to her. "His number and address in Vienna. I wouldn't call though; he might just pick up and leave if he knows I've told you where he was. I should go. Take care." He leaned in, giving her a warm peck on her cold cheek.

"You too."

He wrapped his coat around him tighter and headed down the street. She called out to him. He turned back as the wind billowed the trench up around his calves.

She smiled. "Thank you, for everything."

He nodded once before he resumed his steps. Sam glanced down at the paper as she headed back inside the shop. She made a decision that night. Notes were written to those who needed an explanation. All expenses and obligations were taken care of as best as could be on such short notice. She closed the door to her apartment for the last time, carrying her two bags, and ran away as quietly as possible.

The days that made up her train trip gave her time to solidify her plans. She prepared herself for anything, going over every possible scenario in her mind. Acceptance was inevitable, no matter what would occur. Feeling like a spy, Sam did her best to hunt down Alex when she arrived in Vienna. It didn't take long. Before the dawn crept over the tops of the buildings, she found herself standing in front of the small apartment building that bore the same address she clutched in the palm of her hand.

Every part of her body shook. Her fingers played over the intercom button to his apartment. What if he wasn't alone? She bit her lip, looking up at the windows and wondering which belonged to him. The sound of a door opening down the street grabbed her attention. It was the café she had passed a few minutes earlier. She grabbed her bags and retraced her steps, hoping for a place to hide and collect her thoughts.

She sat in the corner of the café, her eyes rarely leaving the door to his building. She sipped the strong coffee, her anxiety building as the day crept in. The street became busy. Every door opened except for the one she stared at. When it finally did her heart jumped in her chest. Disappointment followed as

two women emerged chattering. Her impatience won out. A few bills were left on the table as she headed out. The thumping of her heart drowned out any other noise around her. She reached the door and pushed the button, recoiling as if she had received a shock. She waited out the seconds. The headache she had since the early morning pounded inside her skull. A sharp static cut the air. There was a clearing of a throat and Sam's heart pounded even louder.

"Hello?" There was no fear or hesitancy. "Hello?"

Sam reached for the intercom button and leaned forward. "Alex?"

She closed her eyes, imagining his face and wondering what he was thinking. When she heard the buzzer she grabbed her bag and threw her backpack over her shoulder. She glanced around the hallway, noting the manager's apartment. Her eyes went to the top of the steps. She heard an apartment door open above her. She left her bag by the manager's door and gripped the strap of her backpack as she stepped up the stairs. They creaked loudly. Thoughts of running filled her head. Turning the corner, she saw no doors open. One more flight still awaited her. She wished he would come down and greet her warmly. This was not how she wanted it, though she had expected it.

"Up here, Sam."

His voice startled her. She tried to catch her breath as she ascended. She stared straight ahead. He would be watching her as she appeared up the stairs. She looked down for a few seconds. Her hand shook as she grasped the rail with each step. She prepared herself, reaching the top and gazing at the wall ahead. A hand touched hers and she turned, gasping for breath.

The slight look of shock on his face faded into a soft smile. Sam's eyes filled with tears as she looked at his face, filled with happiness impossible to hide. He approached tentatively. His fingers came up to brush the tears off her cheeks, first one and then the other. His hair had been cut shorter and his skin had a tan healthy look. His eyes stared back, as blue as she remembered. His lips parted between soft, nervous gulps. His frame was not as gaunt as he had been in the prison.

"It's good to see you."

Sam nodded, feeling his fingers leave her face. She ached for him to embrace her, for some sign of the past. It was her turn to say something.

"I'm sorry I showed up unexpectedly."

He looked up. "It's alright. I figured you would sooner or later. Do you want to come in?"

"Not if I'm bothering..."

He cut her off, smiling. "Of course not. Come in."

She followed him down the hall, staring at his back, wondering what he would do if she placed a hand on his shoulder. She imagined him jerking away the same way she had done at the top of the steps. He walked in, holding the door for her. She looked around at the beautiful surroundings of an artist's studio. Canvases lined walls, some painted, others not, some in the process in between. An easel and stool, paints and drop cloths filled a corner.

"You've been busy." She knelt down and took a close look at one. "Decided to try your hand at oils after all?"

"Yeah."

"I think that's great. They're wonderful."

"Thanks."

"Have you shown them to anyone?"

"A few. Have you shown yours to anyone yet?"

Sam stared up at him. "No."

"Still not ready?"

She shook her head.

"I've sold a couple actually. Even have some on display."

"Congratulations."

"It's all because of you."

"You would have found it eventually."

"No. Not without you. Can I take your bag?"

He motioned to her backpack. She handed it over to him glancing at the tanned fingers as they wrapped around its straps. His solid hands passed the backpack between them nervously. She looked up and met his gaze.

"Sit down. I'll get you something to drink."

She watched him drop her backpack in a corner before disappearing. There was a small couch and Sam sat looking out the picture window. She felt uneasy. Why did everything feel as if it had been turned inside out? In order to fill the room with something she spoke loudly.

"I've got your drawings in there."

"What?"

"The drawings you did in Padua, I brought them."

He reappeared and Sam caught her breath. The sight of him made her lose her train of thought. She was vexed with herself for allowing her feelings to be displayed so easily. His small smile answered back, unmistakably uneasy as well. Sam's throat pulsed when he handed her a cup of coffee.

"Thanks." Her voice cracked.

He sat on the couch beside her. "So, you brought my drawings? Is that the only reason you came?"

Sam turned to him. "I wanted to see if you were alright before I left."

"Left Padua?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"I was thinking of visiting France." There was no point in turning back. "I was surprised when I got your letter. I didn't let myself believe it at first. I thought that maybe you just needed time to come around."

His eyes filled with sadness. "I can't come around." He looked down at the floor. "Listen, I have to get some work done...have to finish this painting today."

Sam got up in a hurry, her head spinning. "Sure. I'll just leave these here for you."

She walked over to the backpack and unzipped it. She pulled out the papers, stood up, and placed them on the arm of the couch. He turned back to her, tears filling his eyes.

"Sam, I..."

"Don't."

"It's just that, I wish I could explain."

"You've made yourself very clear." The backpack was over her shoulder and she was ready to run out the door.

"Will you be in Vienna long?" he asked.

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Oh. Will you stop by before you leave?"

Sam looked into his eyes. "What for?"

"So I can say goodbye."

"You can say that now."

Alex smiled. "But I don't want to now."

Sam shrugged. "Alright."

"Thank you for these." His fingertips brushed over the papers.

"Sure. Well, I'll see you later then."

"Where are you staying?"

"I don't know yet."

"There's a nice hotel near the square. I stayed there when I first got here. Let me write down the address for you."

After a quick scribble, a piece of paper was handed to her.

"Thanks. I'm glad you were able to make it out of there."

"I couldn't have if it wasn't for you."

Sam left it at that. "Bye."

"I'll see you later, tonight? Should be done in time to get something to eat."

"Maybe."

"Good. I usually eat at the café down the street."

Sam gave a short nod and walked out of the apartment. Her eyes followed the steps as she crept down. She caught him watching her from the doorway, but didn't look up. Her feet picked up the pace, stumbling over each other. It wasn't until she grabbed the handle of her bag in the hall that she heard the door shut.

Chapter 53

~ Fallen Angel ~

Alex was still in shock, not feeling his feet beneath him as he managed to stumble to the couch. He sat down and placed his head between his knees in an effort to stop his head from spinning. He stared at the wood floor; his eyes wide. He breathed fiercely out of his mouth and listened to the racing of his heart. He was debating within himself as he had done so often over the past months.

I don't want to break her heart again.

A sharp gasp emerged from him as he sat back up. His head fell back, exhausted. A tingle ran through his fingers as he thought of the skin he had briefly touched by the stairs. It was stupid to think the feelings would disappear that easily. The ache he had buried for over a year rushed to the surface.

She laid in bed needing to rest, but her mind unwilling. Her tears had waited until she made it into the hotel room. Now she was still awake. She gave herself another hour to get some sleep or she would simply leave in the middle of the night. Even an empty train station would provide more solace than the bed, the room, the hotel, and this town. All of it only meant one thing to her. It was all a part of Alex. And she was no longer a part of him. He had made that clear.

Her thoughts went back to his face. The year since they had seen each other had aged him considerably. There was maturity in the eyes that hadn't been there before. She had a hard time placing the other feeling that lined his face. It was a mixture of sadness and serenity. It troubled her. *There's no reason he shouldn't be happy if this is what he wants.* Then there was the smile that conjured the Alex she remembered. Her head hurt. She was tired of the games. She could finally admit defeat. She got out of bed and began to dress.

The streetlights greeted her coolly. She hoped the walk to the station in the chilly air would wake her up. It was approaching 2:00 in the morning. According to the hotel clerk the next train would not be at the station until 5:00.

"Where are you off to?"

Her body snapped to attention. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh-uh, I asked first." Alex smiled warily, looking down at her bag.

"I'm headed to the station."

He wrapped the black trench coat around him. "This early. There won't be another train..."

"I know. Your turn."

"When I didn't see you at the café, I got worried."

"Why were you worried?"

"I didn't want you to run away."

Sam put her bag on the floor. "I never ran away from you."

"You did this morning."

Sam laughed, amazed and hurt. "I was running because you were pushing."

Alex shook his head. "I don't want to fight."

"Then let me go."

"Not yet."

"Why not?" she pleaded. "You have to let me go, please."

She clutched the thin coat against her chest and spoke softly. "I can't keep on pretending. I need to get on with my life like you asked me to. There's no point in staying here. Not when I know how you feel about me."

He spoke slowly. "That's just it. You don't know everything. Please, come with me. You have three hours 'til the next train. That should give you time to decide after you hear all of it." He grabbed her bag.

She sighed. "I'm so tired."

"I know. So am I." He walked ahead of her. "Maybe we'll finally be able to rest." He motioned with his head. "Please. You have no idea what I felt when I heard your voice this morning. It was relief and dread all at once. I'm sorry. That's not what I meant to say."

"Yes it was."

She kept her eyes on the sidewalk in front of her. She could hear him in back of her as she strode ahead of him.

"It wasn't the dread of seeing you. It was that I knew I had to tell you everything. It's hard to hide things from you. The letter was easy. You weren't there to understand my thoughts and feelings."

His pace picked up as he crossed the street to his building. She followed and watched as he fumbled with the keys. *Moment of truth.* His palms were sweaty. The keys slid out of his grasp.

They entered and headed up to his apartment. Sam was mindful of the loud creaking the weight of their bodies made on the stairs. As he had done the previous morning, he held his apartment door open for her. The streetlight from the picture window sliced through the darkness, spilling over the couch and creating a jagged edge that reached a point on the wood floor. A click in the corner and a soft light made everything glow. Sam heard a rustle as the bag was placed on the floor and he shuffled out of his coat.

"Let me take your coat."

She placed the backpack behind the couch and slipped out of it. He caught it. Her fingers played with the tips of her hair. Alex felt his fingers tingle as he resisted the urge to reach out and touch a few of the curls.

"It's beautiful."

Sam looked at him. "What?"

"Your hair. It's gotten long again."

She nodded. "Thank you. It's gotten its share of gray hairs, too." Alex smiled and Sam had to look away. "Well, I'm here."

"It's so strange." His shoes tapped against the floor as he made his way around to the couch in the corner. "I get these moments when I look at you. It makes me forget about everything. Before I can take the time to enjoy them they're gone again. Sit."

She found her seat across from him.

"Have you heard from Cil?" he asked.

"She came to Verona before I left."

Sam... how am I going to...? "Was it very hard for her?"

"Of course it was." Sam pursed her lips together. "She lost her son."

Like I lost you. "Yeah. She would have lost me anyway if I'd stayed in that place. At least there's a... finality to it this way. And Sid?"

Sam shrugged. "As far as I know he's all right."

"That's good." The smell of you...

Sam grew impatient. "Is that what you asked me up here for? To get caught up?"

Alex shook his head. "It's hard to find a way to tell you all of it."

"Try."

He looked deep in thought, preparing his words. Sam smiled. He caught her reaction out of the corner of his eye. *Don't you know how hard you make things when you look at me like that?*

"What?"

"You look the way you did when you practiced sketching."

He nodded. "You gave me so many gifts."

Sam shook her head. "That was all yours."

"I came back to Vienna to escape. To forget all that." *Shit, don't say it like that... she'll think...* "I needed to go to a place that was just mine."

"And Michael's?"

I should have listened to him. "I know you think we escaped together." How many times did he tell me she should know why? "That I came back here because I'd changed my mind about Michael. But the truth is Michael felt obligated to stay with me until I recovered."

"Recovered from your stay in prison?"

Alex's eyes filled with tears and he moved closer to her. Sam became frightened, wondering what caused him so much pain. His hand came to her face, grasping the side of it. He pulled her closer still, their lips inches apart. She watched his lips tremble as he tried to speak. Her hand came up to clutch his wrist. She let out a small gasp.

"What is it?"

Don't turn away from me. "Do you know how much I love you?"

She let out a short cry out as the tears fell. "You have to know I couldn't, I'd never...never stopped..."

He kissed her forehead and breathed in the scent of her. *Lilacs.* She closed her eyes, feeling his lips against her skin.

"But I had to leave." He leaned his cheek against her hair. "I didn't want to torture the both of us, being so close and not being able to..." *Will you ever feel the same?* "I wish we could do all the things I've dreamed about." His hands cradled her face. "Look at me, Sam. I... I didn't get out in time. Michael wasn't able to get me out of the prison...until *after* the surgery."

His hands traveled down her neck to her shoulders, before slipping off her arms and resting on her thighs. He felt everything leave his body. A rush of humiliation washed over him, knowing she would

never look at him the same.

"I didn't want you to have to try and..."

"Alex...I'm sorry."

Alex nodded. "I couldn't be with you the way I wanted. I'll never be able to again."

"And you thought I wouldn't want to be with you?"

"No, I know you would. But in time..."

"You'll always be enough for me." She took his hand and kissed it. "I tried to live without you. I don't like it." She let out an uncomfortable laugh.

"I'd be cheating you."

"You'd cheat me to deny me the pleasure of your company." She kissed his lips, feeling at home. "I love you."

He pulled her close, breathing into her hair. "I love you, too. But it's so much to ask, thinking of how it was. Are you sure you want to try again?"

"Of course I'm sure. Are you sure you want to be with me?"

"Yes."

They sat holding each other for an hour. Alex stroked her hair, leaning his chin on the top of her head. It was Sam who reaffirmed the decision.

"Well, then, I guess I won't be needing that train ticket."

She hugged him with a mixture of contentment and sadness. Finally, she understood the reason behind the change in him. Her nose brushed against his neck. He sighed and stroked her arm. The protection from lack of intimacy gone, he relaxed into her, molding his body against hers.

"How was everything in Padua?"

"Fine. Mira's business is picking up and Ajit's found himself someone."

"Really? That's great. He deserves someone."

"Were you working at Liselle's?"

"Yeah. I left the painting with her. Mom's angel; you. For safe-keeping 'til I got settled."

"You're settled."

Sam looked up at him. "I should send for it then?"

"Absolutely."

He kissed her softly, deepening it briefly before breaking away. It made her shiver. The backs of his fingers stroked her hair. He inspected her face.

"You look tired."

"I am."

"Come on. I'll show you the bedroom where we'll be sleeping." He glided out from under her embrace, his grin returning. "Among other things."

She grabbed his hands as he lifted her off the couch. With his arm tucked under her they walked into the bedroom. Sam clutched his side tightly, following his gentle lead. Her mind felt ready to finally

rest. The safe strength of his arm comforted her, gave her peace of mind.

Her eyes closed momentarily before she opened them, fighting off sleep. Then his arms were under her for support, heavy with the need to give in to slumber. The soft sheets greeted her, first under then over her. She watched him as he took care of her. Her hand reached for his. It was only moments before he was lying next to her. His lips brushed against her forehead. She inspected his face once more. He kissed her lips. She smiled, content. Her eyes finally closed.

She heard him whisper, "It's all right. I'll be right here."

—

THE END