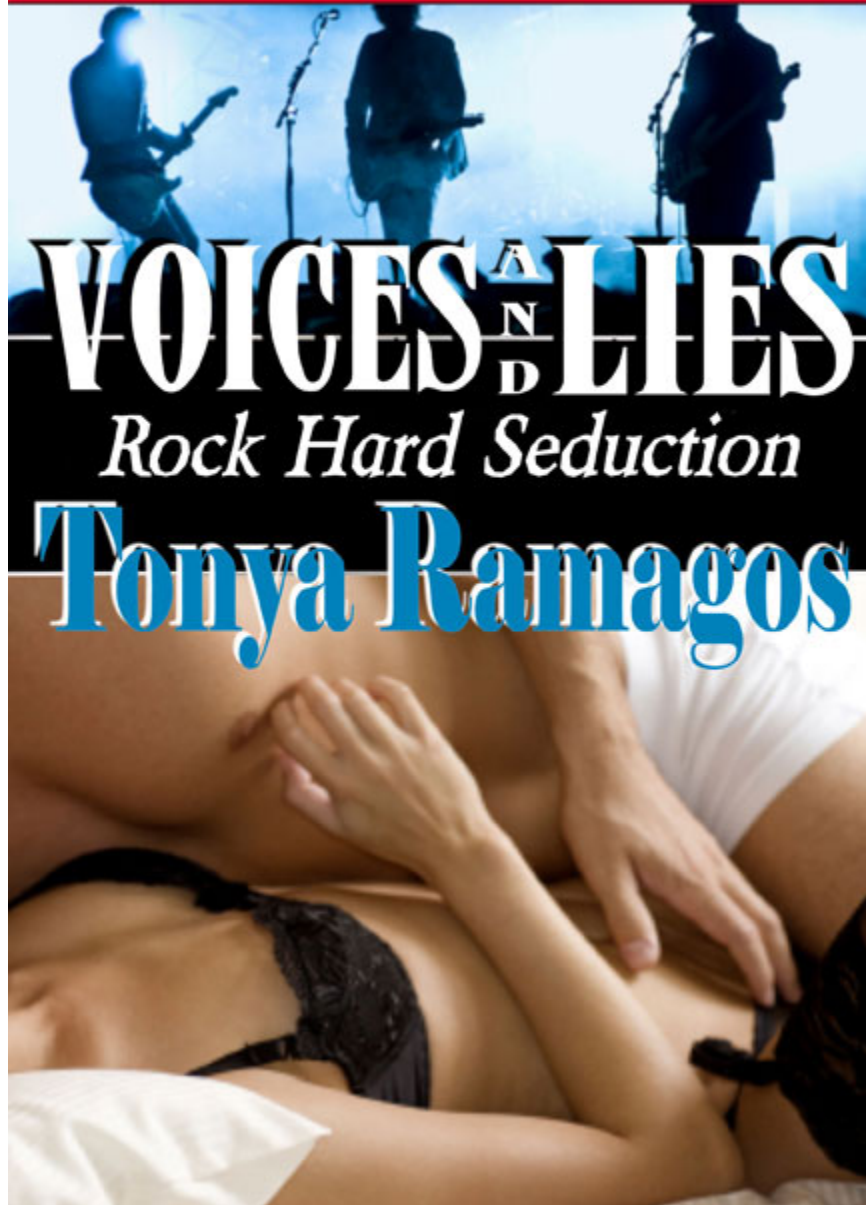


SIREN PUBLISHING



VOICES AND LIES

Rock Hard Seduction

Tonya Ramagos

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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VOICES AND LIES

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DEDICATION

To the band and board members of the DMB. Thank you for your support and help in getting my facts straight

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VOICES AND LIES

Rock Hard Seduction

TONYA RAMAGOS

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Prologue

Alicia Addison felt like a giddy teenager with a crush. At twenty-nine years old, it was an exhilarating ride. She intended to stay on board as long as she could. Her stomach fluttered with excited butterflies as she stood among the crowd of other Façade fans waiting for her favorite band to arrive, waiting for her favorite man.

“There they are.” Diana Thompson nudged Alicia with her elbow, pointed and then threw her head back and laughed. “On a golf cart, who would have thought?”

Alicia peered through the chain-link fence and the butterflies in her stomach kicked into a boogie dance. Flanked by four beefy men wearing jeans and yellow pullovers with the word 'security' printed in big bold black letters on the back, the golf cart traveled through the gate entrance, stopping a few feet away from where she stood.

“Trey and Reese brought the girls with them.” Diana's voice dripped with jealousy. “Wow! She really *is* pregnant,” she said of the woman with the rounded stomach sitting on Trey Langston's lap. “Lucky broads. I didn't know Reese had a girlfriend, too.”

“Neither did I.” Alicia glanced at the women slowly climbing from the laps of the band's bass player and drummer. Both were twenty-something looking brunettes dressed in white tank tops; one in jeans, the other in khaki Capri pants; and white sandals. They looked

like sisters though Alicia couldn't be sure.

Garrett Henry, the band's guitarist, was the next to step off the golf cart followed by the vocalist, Derek Kadin.

It might have been nearly ninety degrees beneath the sun's penetrable rays, but that didn't stop Alicia's skin from erupting with goose pimples. Her head cocked slightly to one side, her gaze slowly slid down Derek Kadin and back up again. The familiar sexual jolt that always shot through her when she looked at this man made her weak in the knees. She placed a steadying hand on Diana's shoulders and swallowed hard. Though it felt parched only seconds before, her mouth started to water, her gaze taking in every delectable inch of him as though he were a forbidden fruit.

Oh yeah, he definitely looked sexy enough to devour in many slow, savory bites. He stood five-foot-seven, she knew, though his black leather platform boots added an inch to his height. Despite the immense heat of the day, he wore black leather pants that hugged his drool-worthy ass like a second skin with a black cotton muscle shirt that stopped at the waistband of his pants, stretching deliciously over his solid upper body.

Alicia heard the age-old saying bald is beautiful but until she laid eyes on this man she never actually believed. Though he'd been nice looking with hair—she'd seen older photos of him on the Internet—shaving his head promoted him to drop-dead gorgeous and more than doable on the hot list.

Move over Vin Diesel, Derek Kadin is the man.

"You're not going to faint are you?" Diana teased.

"I might." Alicia gave a breathless chuckle, unable to draw her eyes from the heavy metal star. It was okay to gawk, she told herself. It wasn't like she was the only woman in the crowd practically undressing the man with her eyes. The mere thought of what he would look like under those clothes was enough to make a woman faint.

The security guards escorted the band members to a table set under a large blue tent bordered with enormous plastic signs

advertising *Hot Topic*, *Jagermeister*, and other sponsors of this year's Metalfest.

“Just don't turn into a babbling idiot when you meet him.”

“I would never!” Alicia gasped, clinching the band's music CD she held so hard the plastic case nearly cracked. But even as she continued to stare at Derek, she could feel her IQ dropping into the single digits.

Oh, please don't let me babble. She said a silent prayer. She never met anyone famous and for Derek Kadin to be her first was enough to make her lightheaded with fear. *He's just a man. He's just a man.* She repeated it like a broken record. Maybe if she kept up the silent chant she wouldn't do or say anything stupid. *But oh what a man he is.*

It wasn't his celebrity status that made Derek so appealing to her. Nor was it his position as the lead vocalist of Façade that made the band her favorite. As a whole, they were four extremely talented musicians. The songs they wrote, the music they played, each guitar riff, each hit of the bass, each beat of the drum, seeped into Alicia's consciousness and became a part of her. She related to the music, the lyrics more than that of any other band she ever heard. Derek alone was simply an added bonus. He had a voice that blew her away and an innate sexuality that made her crave him more than oxygen.

The line of fans eagerly waiting for their moment to meet the band inched forward. Alicia and Diana were the twenty-third and twenty-fourth in a line of probably close to one hundred. She knew. She had counted those in front of them while waiting for the band to arrive. It seemed like such a long distance at the time but, as the autograph table neared, she almost wished they were at the back of the line.

“Bad news, sister.” Diana craned her neck to see around an Amazon-built woman blocking her view. “The security guards aren't allowing pictures with the band.”

“Pictures would slow down the line.” Alicia pushed a hard breath of disappointment from her lungs. She'd hoped to get a picture with Derek—a chance to have her meeting with him forever frozen in time.

“People are snapping pics from the sidelines. I’ll hurry through, get my autographs then take a few as you go through the line. Stall if you can.” Diana instructed. “Give me time to get in a good spot before you reach Derek. I’ll get his attention and we’ll still get your picture with him.”

“Always the woman with the plan.”

Diana sent her a conspiratorial wink.

True to her word, when their turn came to have their CD’s signed by the band, Diana quickly got her autographs and pushed to the front of the crowd gathered at the barricade.

Alicia was greeted with wide smiles and handshakes from Reese, Garrett and Trey as they scribbled their names next to their pictures on the CD cover insert. She said a quick thank you to each, congratulated Trey on the upcoming birth of his baby, then she was standing in front of him, staring eye to eye with Derek Kadin.

Time stood still. She felt her insides melt under his too-penetrating gaze like a cup of ice cream left out in the sun. *Somebody give the man a straw so he can drink me like a milkshake.*

He smiled. A slow, leisurely smile that was oh-so-sexy and made her wonder if he just read her thoughts.

God, I hope not. Still, she felt the heat rising to redden her cheeks.

“Hello.” His voice was light, sweet, titillating. It flowed from his succulent lips, swirled around her, enveloped her in a wave of warmth, igniting desires deep within her that were best ignored...especially when they were face to face.

“Hi.” She smiled in return, astonished when the word came out in a normal, level tone. Inside, she felt riveted by every emotion known to a woman—excitement, nervousness, longing, lust—but on the outside she had to appear calm, cool and collected. She refused to fall apart in front of him like countless other women did. She couldn’t let him see how bad she wanted to pull him out of that chair, push him back on the table and ride him to oblivion right there in front of the thousands of people at Metalfest.

She felt her pussy throb at the mental picture that sprang to mind—his hard naked body under hers, his dick buried deep inside her aching channel—and she nearly blushed again.

When he bent his head to scribble his autograph beside his picture on her CD insert, she closed her eyes and took a deep soothing breath. Her eyes flew open a half a heartbeat later when she heard Diana's outrageously loud voice call out Derek's name. "Will you take a picture with her, please?"

Derek looked at Diana then up at Alicia. "Of course." He placed the cap on the black Sharpie he used for autographs, then stood, and leaned over the table closer to Alicia.

She met him halfway, her heart hammering in her chest so loud it was impossible for him not to hear it. Her breath caught in her throat as his arm slid around her, the palm of his hand stopping on the small of her back. She leaned into him, put one arm around his expansive shoulders and touched his chest lightly with the palm of her other hand. Heat radiated from his body.

The sensation was too exquisite, too intense. The smell of his spicy citrus cologne mixed with his natural scent drifted to seduce her senses. She concentrated on his smell, on the feeling of his body against hers. His crisp masculine angles felt as erotic pressed to her slim curves as she had known they would. She could have stayed there forever, feeling him, smelling him, reveling in the ecstasy of being in his arms. But sadly, too soon Diana snapped the picture and the moment was over.

Reluctantly, Alicia slowly straightened. Derek's fingers danced across her waist as he pulled his arm from around her sending shivers of longing throughout her body. "Thank you." The words were barely a whisper.

"My pleasure." He smiled again and sat back down in his chair.

With hands that begged to shake, she picked up her now autographed CD. As she walked away, she carefully tucked each feeling, each second of memory into a silver chest in her mind and

slowly closed the lid, locked it. Though it felt longer, their encounter lasted only minutes. It was most likely the one and only time she would ever be in the arms of Derek Kadin but she would cherish those short minutes for the rest of her life. And thanks to her best friend she had a portion of those minutes visibly captured on film.

* * * *

Derek stood in a circle with his band mates and took a long fortifying gulp from the Crown Royal bottle they were passing between them. Though he'd had a few drinks throughout the afternoon, he wasn't drunk. Nowhere near. Performing in an alcohol-induced state was something he rarely allowed himself to do. All around him, metal stars spent much of their time downing alcohol and doing drugs. They lived the life that formed the old cliché sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. He didn't fault them for their choices and most of them were very dear friends, but theirs was a lifestyle he could not subscribe to. His responsibility to his band mates, to the music, to the fans, to himself was too great.

In less than five he and his band mates would hit the stage for their forty-five minute set at Metalfest. It had been a long day full of autographs, interviews and appearances leaving little time for them to enjoy the music of the other bands that performed before them. They should have been exhausted after going nonstop for over twelve hours. Instead, Derek felt the adrenaline of anticipation pulsating through his veins.

The energy inside him increased as the four of them moved toward the stage entrance. A chant began, softly at first, then growing to mind-blowing intensity as more and more of the crowd joined in yelling their name. They called for Façade to take the stage as the lights went down, plunging the crowd into darkness. Once again in a circle, Derek, Reese, Trey and Garrett extended their fists to the center, touching knuckles in their pre-show gesture of friendship and

good luck.

Derek pictured in his mind's eye what the crowd of fans saw as Reese, Trey, and Garrett took the stage. They performed the same set many times since their world tour began and would perform it a dozen more before the tour ended. He knew without looking the stage was bathed with darkness broken only by a hint of blue lights outlining the short staircases on either side of Reese's drum set. The crowd couldn't see Garrett and Trey—they stood in the darkness atop the larger arched staircases further down on either side of the long platform stretching behind Reese—but they could hear the slow, powerful riffs coming from Garrett's guitar in conjunction with the drumbeat.

After several measures, a dim red light joined the blue illuminating Reese and his *Pearl* drums as the beat of the introductory song picked up. Then all lights disappeared gradually as the music faded. There was a brief pause before blue spotlights suddenly kicked on behind Trey and Garrett, a brighter red light silhouetting Reese, as the three broke into a heavier melody of bass, guitar and drums.

Backstage, Derek took his cordless microphone from the sound engineer and continued to listen as the roar of the crowd grew wondrous. By now, Garrett and Trey would be making their way down the adjacent staircases to their positions before the crowd on the stage.

Though he didn't hold stock in any one organized religion, Derek believed there was a God and said a quick prayer to the deity for a flawless performance. He climbed the few steps of the stairwell unseen by the fans and moved onto the second platform extending from staircase to staircase between Reese and the large backdrop depicting the logo off the band's latest CD.

The introductory melody drew to an end with three sets of hard hitting beats from the drums, guitar, and bass followed by a harder, single one before fading into the beginning measures of the band's latest chart-topping release. A white spotlight washed over Derek, momentarily blinding him. But he didn't need his eyes to know the

crowd was going wild. As his vision adjusted he saw thousands of fists pumping the air to the powerful beat of the music, some with the index and pinky fingers extended forming the adopted sign of heavy metal known as devil horns. On the floor before the stage, two mosh pits began to stir, the participants hurling themselves into each other in a unified heavy metal dance. The cheers were ear splitting and as he thrust his own fist in the air the crowd grew louder still.

He smiled and felt his dick stiffen behind the zipper of his leather pants. This level of energy coming from a crowd this large gave him a hard-on every time. It was better than sex!

There was no doubt that he was doing what he'd been born to do. He traveled other roads, tried other careers. He went to college and received degrees in philosophy, political science and business administration each of which he utilized at one time or another. He even toyed with the idea of going into law. But, looking back on those times, he now saw it as a bumpy road of growth and character building. Inevitably, that road eventually led him to pursuing a dream he possessed since the age of twelve—to be on stage before thousands of screaming fans, entertaining them with his voice and lyrics he wrote from the heart.

He worked hard to reach his life goal. Together with his band mates, they painstakingly worked to make a name for themselves and the band in the metal music industry. Though they were finally beginning to see the riches that accompanied the fame they achieved after two platinum selling albums and years of meticulous work and non-stop touring, their greatest payment was their fans. Without them, they would be no one. True, it was their talents that got them signed with the record label but without the fans support they would have been dropped like hotcakes.

Derek raised the microphone to his lips and began to sing. The crowd knew all the words and sang along with him. Gratification washed over him as he descended the stairs beside the drum set and took his place in the center front of the stage. A pang of desolation

threatened to push through his electric mood. Too soon, the tour would end and it would be a year or more before the band would begin another. It was a decision they came to unanimously. Trey's baby would be born soon, Garrett needed time to complete the construction of his new house and he and Reese simply needed a break from being in the lime light. They also needed time to write the music for their third CD.

It would be difficult, Derek knew, to be away from the stage for so long. Still, the time out of the spotlight, out of the public eye would be good for him. Their devoted fans wouldn't be too happy with their absence but when they returned to the stage in a year or so they would make it worth the wait of those fans and more.

Chapter One

Alicia fidgeted with the ring on her finger. Even in the dim light of the room the cluster of diamonds sparkled like morning dew, the thin gold band glistening like sunshine. It was expensive, glamorous, the perfect engagement ring for the daughter of a prominent businessman, and she hated it. She preferred silver to gold, single diamonds to clusters, simplicity to gaudy, —completely the opposite of the ring she now wore.

And why the hell was she wearing it in the first place? She paced the plush beige carpet wishing for the mental and physical strength to jerk the unwanted object from her finger and crush it in her fist until it was nothing more than diamond chips and gold flakes.

It happened so fast. One minute, she had been sitting in the dining room of the Chateau de Meraux forcing herself to enjoy the pre-birthday dinner with her parents, sister, brother-in-law, and William Templeton. She would have rather had a root canal than suffer through another prim and proper dinner in an elegant restaurant. The next, William had been on one knee asking her to marry him.

She'd wanted to scream, wanted to run, wished for a door to slam shut on the never-ending hole of darkness in which she suddenly found herself tumbling. Instead, she forced a painstaking smile as William slipped the enormous so-wrong-for-her ring on her finger generating applause from the dozens of patrons who looked on around them. Now, hours later, she was engaged, pacing the floor of William's penthouse apartment, hardly noticing her fiancé's presence as he spoke wildly of business on the phone in the next room, and searching aimlessly for a way to escape this latest disaster in her life.

"It's exquisite, isn't it?" William's large, callus-free hands grasped her bare shoulders. His clean-shaven face nestled in the arch of her neck as he looked over her shoulder.

She hadn't heard him approach and suppressed a shudder as his hands slid down her arms to her waist, pulling her against him. She felt the hint of his erection in her back and knew exactly how he intended for the night to end.

"Just as you are in that dress." He whispered in her ear.

The dress was a satin corset with a pleated bust and back, crisscross straps, and pink. She hated pink! The color was too babyfied, too girlish.

"Both suit you...the ring, the dress. I knew they would the moment I spotted them."

No, they don't. Alicia swallowed the scream. *They don't suit me and if you would accept the real me rather than attempting to mold me into what you want me to be you would realize that.*

He grasped her waist and slowly turned her in his arms to face him. He was taller than she, five-foot-eleven to her five-foot-six, and as she gazed up at him she couldn't help but wonder how a man so richly handsome, so smart, could be so stupid and so blind.

William had been poured from the mold designed for the daughters of every filthy rich capitalist of the world. He wore his golden blond hair cut short, feathered slightly in front. His moisturized skin was tanned and wrinkle-free, his body fit from hours at the gym. He had removed the tie and jacket of his tuxedo and unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt to reveal a path of blond curls on his chest. He wasn't the type of man to whom she usually found herself attracted but she had to admit he was rather handsome. His eyes were a shade of green that held the ability, she believed, to dazzle even behind the wire-rimmed glasses if only they would lose their seriousness once in a while.

And that was his problem, she decided, though she had known it all along. The man was far too somber. All business and no play made

William Templeton a very dull man. He lived his life on an organized schedule as if each happening was an event, no, a *task* to be performed in complete concentration and seriousness.

"I'm pleased you accepted my proposal." He planted a simple, unmoving kiss on her lips. "Not that I had any doubts you would."

But I didn't accept. I didn't say yes. I didn't say anything!

She squeezed her eyes shut, wishing she could be broken down into tiny particles and transferred to another place, any place in the world like a character in the transporter on *Star Trek*.

"Are you feeling poorly darling?" He cupped her chin in his palm and tilted her head further back to look at her.

You have no idea.

She squashed the urge to vomit. Fear, revulsion, helplessness over this latest course her life was taking made her sick to her stomach. She could end it all now. Say no, take the ring off and leave. But it wasn't that simple. There were too many people to consider, too many emotions.

"Just a little headache," she lied. "Probably too much champagne."

"Stay with me tonight." His no-nonsense tone made it more of an order than a request. His lips brushed hers again. "Come to bed and I'll help you forget that headache."

Why can't you help me forget it right here? Rip this God-awful dress off, throw me down on the floor and fuck me until I scream!

He wouldn't, she knew. Wishing for spontaneity and un-uniformed sex out of William would be as beneficial as wishing for Scotty to beam her up. Instead, she followed him to the bedroom like an obedient puppy and stood by the bed while he removed his tuxedo shirt and pants and hung them neatly in the closet. His simple white cotton briefs and black socks followed, placed neatly in an overstuffed lounge chair in the corner.

The room was like something out of a fairytale, decorated in creams and pastels, ruffles and lace. The furnishings were sparse and

just the right mix of modern and antique, a Victorian carved dresser and bedside table, a king-size four-post bed and a floral print Chaise. Any other man would have thought such surroundings too girlish, but not William. Alicia knew he saw the room as elegant and romantic. And maybe it was if one truly enjoyed the rich and frilly.

Unashamed by his nakedness, William stepped behind her and unzipped her dress. He hooked one finger of each hand under the straps and eased them off her shoulders, down her arms. The dress fell gracefully at her feet, leaving her in nothing but her stiletto heels, garter belt and hose.

“You're not wearing underwear!” He sounded shocked and appalled.

Alicia mentally rolled her eyes. Weren't most men turned on to distraction by the mere idea of a woman going commando? *Do you have to be so boring?* She nearly groaned. Sliding her feet from her heels, she stepped to one side, leaving the shoes in the circle made by the discarded dress on the floor.

“Remove your stockings too darling.”

She moved to the four-post bed and perched on the edge. With easy, glided movements, she unfastened the straps and slowly rolled off her stockings. Such an act could be very seductive—it worked in countless romance novels and movies—provided the seduced paid attention, that is. But William busied himself with the hanging of her dress. For Pete's sake! She loved sex but it was incredibly difficult to get turned on when her partner's idea of foreplay was cleaning house!

Once each article of their clothing was put to rights, he advanced on her. He carefully moved her back on the bed, easing her down as if she were a fragile piece of eighteenth century china and moved over her. His kiss was soft, his tongue in total control as it pushed inside her mouth and tangled with hers.

Though she would have preferred more power, more passion, she felt her body reacting in the expected way. Her nipples tightened as his gentle kisses made a trail down her neck, across her collarbone,

down to her breasts. He simultaneously pushed her legs apart with his and nestled his lower body between her thighs. He drew one taut nipple into his mouth, sucked, and circled its pebbled surface with his tongue. A slow pulsating heat trickled through her, settling between her legs. She felt his hard cock pressing against her pussy and she wanted to pull him inside, milk him with her tight wet lips.

Supporting his weight on one elbow, he brought his free hand to her other breast, cupped it, massaged it. Her back arched in response, pushing her tits further into his hand and mouth. Unwilling to wait any longer, she reached between them, grabbed his penis in her hand, led it to the wet, eagerly awaiting opening of her vagina. With one final suck, he withdrew his mouth from her breast and let go of the other to place his hand flat on the bed beside her.

He gazed down at her, his green eyes darkened by his sexual need. Slowly, he slid inside her. He was average size and she took him easily, willingly. Her eyes closed as she focused on the feeling of his dick easing in and out of her, in, out, in the snail's pace rhythm he set.

She tried to lift her hips, tried to speed up the thrusts but he wouldn't allow it. Slow, pretty sex wasn't what she craved. She wanted him to pound into her, wanted to feel him deep inside her in quick hard movements. She wanted him to fuck her until her come ran down her inner thighs. Instead, he continued his gentle thrusts slowly, ever so gradually bringing her closer to an orgasm. But at this rate he would reach sexual fulfillment before she could.

Moving a hand between them again, she delved a finger in her dark curly mound and sought out her clit. Using her own juices as lubrication, she smoothed the warm goo over her bud and massaged it with small, pressured circles. The movement, the feeling, increased her pleasure drawing a moan from her lips. He grunted, the sound coming from low in his throat as his thrusts picked up the slightest bit of speed. Her finger went wild on her clit, pushing, circling, and bringing the throbbing inside her to an almost unbearable race.

They crossed the finish line together with one final thrust, one

final massage and he fell on top of her. She felt the complete weight of his body on hers, the warmth of his heavy breathing on her neck.

Slowly, she opened her eyes only to shut them again in the next heartbeat. She couldn't marry this man. No way could she spend the rest of her life pretending, acting as if she were someone she wasn't, feigning complete satisfaction from something she could have done herself in the privacy of her own cottage.

And love. What about love? William said he loved her. He said it now as he lifted himself off her and headed for the bathroom to wash away the evidence of their sex. But was it true love or simple obligation to the woman he intended to marry? She couldn't be sure. Especially when she knew his number one goal was to become the chief executive of the Addison Empire right next to her brother-in-law, Paul. And what better way to accomplish that goal than to marry the last remaining Addison daughter?

Instead of settling contently into a relaxing calm of orgasm-induced peace, her body hummed with dissatisfaction. She sat up in the center of the bed and hugged her legs to her chest. She had to find a way out. She couldn't marry him, couldn't spend the rest of her life with a man she didn't love. It would hurt him, if he really did love her that is. And her mother, what would she do?

Before she had a chance to answer the thought, William returned to the room.

"I'll be gone for several days, hopefully only a week, maybe two." He walked to the dresser and pulled out a clean pair of neatly folded briefs.

She had known this would be his last night in town for a while. They discussed it at dinner earlier in the evening. He would be flying to Las Vegas in the company jet first thing in the morning and she welcomed the distance that would be between them. It would give her time to think, time to formulate a plan to get her out of the mess her life had fallen into.

"While I'm gone I would like for you to do some research." He

pulled back the covers on the bed, slipping between the sheets.

“Research?”

“Yes darling, think of it as a task for one of those...” He waved a hand through the air as if the word he looked for would fall onto his fingertips. “...things you write.”

Alicia glared at him through narrowed eyes. “I don't write *things*. I write romance novels.”

“Yes, yes. Well, I'm sure you have to do some sort of research for those.”

Nothing you help with.

“But this research will be for us. I want you to contact a few realtors, look at a few houses. Make a list of ones you like and we will decide on one when I return.”

“You want me to look at houses? Why?” She couldn't keep the confusion from her voice. In an instant her anger at his total disregard of her work transformed to utter bafflement over *houses*.

“We must have a place to live once we are married.” He fluffed his pillow. “We can't very well make a life together and raise children in this penthouse apartment.”

Make a life together. Raise *chil*-dren!

“You didn't think we would stay in that pitiful shack you live in, did you?”

“I—I hadn't thought about it. And my place is not a shack,” she said through gritted teeth, climbing from the bed. “It's a cottage. And I love my cottage.” *It's the only place I can be me.*

“It's a place for a single woman, Alicia. It's not meant for a husband and wife,” he said dismissively. He removed his glasses and placed them on the bedside table. “We will need a larger, nicer place to live together, something that represents our standing in society. Now get dressed and come to bed darling. I have an early morning tomorrow.”

* * * *

“Alicia, I'm so glad you could come,” Star purred. She walked...No, a woman like Star didn't simply walk. She glided like oil across water; her arms spread wide at her sides and pulled Alicia into a delicate embrace.

She wants something. A warning bell sounded in Alicia's head. It had been less than twelve hours since they saw one another at dinner, yet Star acted as though it had been years. Alicia held her breath to ward off the first assault of overpowering sweet perfume and flower fragranced shampoos and lotions that bathed her sister as she returned Star's hug.

“Your message sounded urgent.” Alicia pulled back and took a much-needed breath. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no.” Star shook her head, the gold earrings with polished turquoise stones dangling from her ears swayed from side to side. The earrings matched the satin turquoise blouse she wore under what Alicia suspected was an Armani business suit. Star wore the charcoal collar jacket buttoned. The matching skirt hugged her trim hips and stopped just below her knees exhibiting a pair of shapely tanned-stockings calves. She had chosen a pair of three inch turquoise stiletto heels to complete the outfit.

Star Addison-Harrington was a poster board for style and elegance. At five-foot-five with a size six hour-glass figure that never displayed an ounce of fat, chestnut hair pulled into an stylish French twist and cat-shaped gray eyes, she managed to look like a supermodel for Vogue even at the age of thirty-four.

“I do need a favor, however.” Star moved to a small fully stocked self-serve bar. “Ginger Ale?” she offered as she poured one for herself.

“No, thanks.” Alicia walked to one of the two caned-back Bergere chairs before a large cherry wood desk and folded one leg under her as she sat down. She waited until her sister settled in her chair behind the desk before asking, “What kind of favor?”

“How is your schedule for the next, oh, couple of weeks?”

Alicia mentally ran through her plans. She had quite a few. There were two e-books on her palm pilot and a paperback on her end table waiting to be read and reviewed, a short story she needed to complete for an online magazine she wrote for and a bit of research to do for the latest installment of *The Blood Diaries*, a series of romantic vampire fiction she created. Then there was the house. She nearly groaned as the mere thought of looking for a house where she would live with William wound her stomach in knots.

She looked down at her hands folded neatly in her lap, the enormous cluster of diamonds staring back at her like an evil face complete with devil horns and a long wagging tongue. At the top of her to-do list, she had only a week, maybe a little more, to figure out how to get the God-awful ring off her finger and the man who gave it to her out of her life.

"The manager at Addison Isles in Morocco rang Paul as we were leaving the restaurant last night. There is some problem at the casino that he can't handle." Star dismissively waved a perfectly manicured hand full of gold. "Paul is making arrangements now to fly out there and he wants me to join him. It's been ages since I've been to Morocco." She spoke faster now, beginning to ramble. "It's so exciting and beautiful and I could really use the break but..."

"But you have guests registered here and don't want to cancel," Alicia finished, catching on quick to her sister's intentions.

"It's too late to cancel." Star placed her hands on the edge of the desk and pulled her chair across the plastic carpet protector until she sat in front of the computer. With quick fluid motions, she clicked the mouse, pulled up the reservation calendar.

Alicia smiled to herself, remembering a time when her sister wouldn't have gotten within twenty feet of a computer. Those were the days when the Addison House Bed and Breakfast was still in its beginning stages, when Star preferred the old-fashioned method of a pen and paper for all business ventures.

Star's vision for Addison House had been that of a small but cozy

and elegant bed and breakfast, a place that would appeal to the wealthy while, at the same time, offer seclusion, fun and comfort. There were only four guestrooms on the second floor with a fifth currently in the works in the third floor attic. Each room was equipped with its own private bath and uniquely decorated with a mix of period furnishings, comfortable beds, plush linens, and plenty of pillows. Outside, guests enjoyed the convenience of an Olympic-size pool, breathtakingly beautiful gardens, and an on-the-grounds tennis court.

Star accomplished her dream almost from the beginning. And though her original vision had simply been to own a Bed and Breakfast, she hadn't foreseen the love of the jobs she decided to do herself. She could've paid someone to take over the accounting, the paperwork, the taking of reservations, but she chose not to. Doing it herself gave her the feeling of accomplishment, control, the feeling of importance that she so desired. What she hadn't foreseen, however, was how unorganized she would become. That event in itself had forced her to succumb to the computer age.

"What?" Star asked, raising one perfectly plucked brow. "You look like the cat that just swallowed the canary."

Alicia shook her head, laughed. "I never thought I would see you look so comfortable behind a computer."

"Comfortable is reaching a bit." Star frowned. "I still don't like this monster. It's so temperamental." She cringed. "But I'll admit it *has* made my job much easier."

Alicia rose to walk around the desk and stand behind her sister. "So the new program I found for you is working better than the old one?" She peered over Star's shoulder.

"When I can remember how to work the damn thing." Star laughed in desperation. She tapped one long flawlessly manicured nail at the computer screen. "I have a full house right now but these two," she pointed to a set of names, one above the other, "will be leaving this afternoon. This one, the Omileys, will leave tomorrow and this couple, the Badcocks, is booked until the end of the week."

“Their last name is *Badcock*?” Alicia winced.

Star shot a wide crimson painted smile over her shoulder. “They’re newlyweds. No relation to the Badcock Furniture Empire. They’re a sweet couple, though the groom can be overly flirtatious at times. Maybe that’s saying something. You know, insecurities from the last name. I’ve always pitied any woman who ended up with a man whose last name is something like *Badcock*. What if the name really fits?”

“Star!” Alicia gasped in mock horror. Her prim and proper sister rarely made such comments.

“Well,” Star said defensively. “Imagine spending the rest of your life with a man who was horrible in bed.”

Alicia didn’t have to imagine. She had William Templeton and a hideous engagement ring to show her the reality. She mentally stored her sister’s comments in her filing cabinet for future use. Maybe she would find them handy in gaining Star’s understanding when she broke her engagement with William. Having Star for an ally would help when it came time to break the news to their parents—more specifically to their mother.

“What about new reservations?”

Star looked back at the computer screen. “We’re approaching the slow season so business is tapering off. There’s another newlywed couple, the...” She hesitated, scrolling through the list of names. “The Stewarts, they will be arriving tomorrow.”

“And they’ll be staying in the Cleopatra,” Alicia guessed as it was the only room designed for honeymoon couples.

“No, they wanted it but their stay is interfering with the Badcocks who are already in the Cleopatra room. The Stewarts settled on the Garden Room instead. It will be vacated today, cleaned and ready for their arrival at three o’clock tomorrow afternoon. And Mr. and Mrs. Winchester, do you remember them?”

Alicia did. The sweet older couple was hard to forget. The woman was dashing, beautiful even at the age of seventy-two. Upon their first

meeting, Mrs. Winchester painted a picture in Alicia's mind of how Marilyn Monroe would have looked had she lived to be a ripe old age. Mr. Winchester was seven years older, a tall, tough looking man with a make-your-sides-scream-in-laughter sense of humor and looks that surely made him a lady-killer in his day. Like a lot of the guests that stayed at Addison House, they were regulars and two people Alicia wouldn't mind spending some time with.

"They'll be flying in on Monday for a week's stay. The Jasmine Room. They love the canopy bed and claw foot tub. Oh, and Mr. Smith. He's a single man who has never stayed here before. He called this morning and reserved the Louis the XIV room."

"For how long?"

"A week, possibly longer. He'll decide when he gets here. I told him that shouldn't be a problem. I don't expect many calls for booking in the next month or so. If by some chance you do need the room, check with him first. I would hate to anger him and lose his business. On the other hand, if a regular patron needs the room..."

"If that happens I'll figure out something to keep everyone happy." Alicia gave Star an assuring pat on her on the shoulder before returning to the chair on the other side of the desk. "What about the other room? Is it finished yet?"

"It is but I'm not ready to rent it out, mostly because I haven't settled on a price. It's a lot larger and offers more than the other rooms. I believe I'm going to reserve it for my more upscale guests. Not that all of my guests aren't upscale," she added quickly.

"What are you going to call it?"

Star thoughtfully tapped a fingernail on her lower lip. "I was thinking of Star's Paradise. What do you think?"

"Sounds exotic, dreamy, romantic," Alicia said approvingly. "It fits."

"He sounded really cute, a bit strange but a very captivating voice." Star pushed away from the computer.

"Whoa! Rewind. Who?"

“Mr. Smith. Very articulate, soft-spoken but powerful, polite, handsome, if such a word can be used to describe a voice. If you weren't an engaged woman I might be worried about leaving you here with him,” Star teased.

Alicia ignored the playful jab. “So what's so strange about him?”

“It was a few things he said, or rather asked.” Star sipped her Ginger Ale. “Very concerned with anonymity, privacy, like he wanted to be sure no one would know he was here.”

“You think Smith is an alias?”

“Definitely.” Star nodded. “Nobody really has the last name Smith. Well, a few poor souls do,” she conceded. “But not nearly as many as those who adopt the name for the purpose of anonymity. And it's not totally uncommon for someone to register under an assumed name. It's happened a couple of times. Remember when Mel Gibson stayed here last year?” Her gray eyes turned dreamy as she recalled her first encounter with the Australian heartthrob. “He used a false name and when I opened the door to find him standing on the other side I nearly fainted!”

Alicia laughed. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall. Star was so rarely caught off guard, to see the woman of such controlled elegance drooling like a Saint Bernard in heat would have been quite a treat.

“Anyway, this Mr. Smith really threw me for a loop when he asked what kind of music my staff and I listen to. He said he knew it was an odd question but he had his reasons. Naturally I told him classical. And Wilma and Debby listen to country in the kitchen sometimes.”

“That's odd.” Alicia drew her brows together in puzzled thought. “Maybe he's a musician of some sort.” Maybe it's Derek Kadin, her fantasy mind whispered. *Yeah, right. Keep dreaming girl.*

“I don't think so,” Star said slowly. “He didn't speak with that Southern drawl like most country singers and he certainly didn't sound like a man involved with that...heavy metal you listen to.” She tipped her glass toward the Godsmack shirt Alicia wore before taking

another sip.

“And that reminds me,” she continued. She set her glass on the desktop, stood and walked around to lean on the edge of the desk in front of Alicia. “You know I don’t have a problem with you wearing your heavy metal shirts and stuff...”

Not as long as you don’t have to be seen with me in public. “I won’t wear them around your guests.” Alicia opted to let the potential beginning of a more than century old pissing match pass. “I’ll dress as you would, just like I did the last time I covered for you.”

“Thanks, sis.” Star’s voice was sincere though she failed to hide the relief mixed in. “You’re welcome to anything in my closet.”

* * * *

Alicia dropped an armful of books on the circular coffee table, moved to the matching end table and punched the play button on the answering machine. As the tape rewound, she went into the kitchen for a can of soda. She’d spent the remainder of her day at the library completing the research for her latest novel. She probably could have found the information she needed on the internet in the comfort of her own home, she knew, but when it came to research she preferred to try the old-fashioned way first. It was the feel of being surrounded by books, the aura of knowledge seeming to linger, that drew her to the library. In the silence, she could escape to a world where only she and thousands of books existed.

“And then there’s the real world,” she muttered aloud as her mother’s recorded voice carried through the cottage. She paused in the opened door of the refrigerator, listened.

“Alicia, we need to get together and discuss your wedding.” Margaret Addison’s high society voice flowed from the answering machine. “I know you and William haven’t yet set a date but there are tons of preliminary arrangements and plans we can make in advance. I need to know what your intentions are darling. Call me.”

“My *intentions* Mom are to make sure this little shindig you're so excited about never takes place.” She snatched a can of soda from the box before slamming the refrigerator door. She popping the top on the can, wishing all the while it was William's head she was bursting instead. The image the thought created, his head caving in, brains spewing everywhere, was a bit too graphic and way too harsh but fitting nevertheless. If it weren't for William she wouldn't be in the fix she'd found herself. She wouldn't be facing the impending doom of sexual-dissatisfaction in a loveless marriage.

“Be a woman, Alicia. You can't blame William when you're the one that's become such a chicken shit.” She gulped the soda, letting the carbonated bubbles tingle in her throat, the taste and chill satisfying her thirst.

What happened to her anyway? Thirteen years ago she would've told her mother to put a sock in it. She would've told William exactly where he could shove his ugly ring and mindless talk of marriage, kids and a huge expensive house. She would've told anyone if they didn't like her they didn't have to be around her, if they didn't like her appearance they didn't have to look.

Okay, so she'd only been fifteen then, the typical age for such rebellious behavior. But she'd been strong, sure of herself and what she wanted out of life. She'd been herself, determined to live the life she wanted, not the life others wanted for her. Now, she barely knew who the hell Alicia Addison was.

It all began when her Grandmother became sick. Barbara Langley meant the world to Alicia. Her Grandmother understood her, loved her no matter what she did or who she was and had faith in her dreams and desires. But she had also been a woman who lived the latter years of her life in deep regrets. She lost the bond with her own daughter, Alicia's mother Margaret, she once held so dear. They grew so distant they only spoke out of necessity and she had seen the same happening between Alicia and her mother. Barbara Langley's dying wish had been for Alicia to change that, to do everything in her power

to form a bond between her and her mother. Alicia made the promise and, in doing so, began to live her mother's dreams, live the life her mother envisioned for her. Her writing was the only part of her own dreams that survived.

"I'm sorry Grandma but I can't do it anymore." She leaned her head back, envisioning the heavens above where she believed her Grandmother's soul to be. "I want mother to be happy but I deserve happiness, too."

Deep down, Alicia knew her mother only wanted the best for her, but to Margaret the best was anything money could buy. Margaret Langley-Addison came from a middleclass family. Though her parents did their best to see she always had her heart's desire, nothing they'd done had been enough. Margaret dreamed of being rich, living in the three-story mansion with all the fancy cars and luxuries of the stars. But she didn't have the talent or the gusto to become a star herself. The answer to her dreams came, however, when she met Jonathon Addison, President and heir to the Addison Hotel and Casino Empire. In less than three months, she won his heart, married him and held all her dreams and desires in the palm of her hand.

Though Alicia grew up in the life of luxury, she never possessed the infinite love and need for money her mother did. She had no desires to live in the big fancy mansion and drive the snazzy cars. The material, elegant, high society life was for Star—the golden daughter in their mother's eyes. Alicia, on the other hand, was the odd ball, the black sheep of the Addison daughters. True, she had her own dreams of fame and, okay, maybe a little fortune. But it was for fame and fortune she achieved herself through her own work as an author, not that which was received by marrying a man who had it all.

She plopped down in her favorite comfy writing chair and sighed as the answering machine proceeded to the next message.

"Ali, it's Diana." The perky, enthusiastic voice of her best friend was music to her ears. "I thought I would drop by tonight if you aren't busy. It's been over a week since we've talked. We need to catch up."

Ring me on the cell.”

The third and final message on the machine was from William. In his business-like controlling tone he informed her of a meeting he set for her with a local realtor. She was to meet a Mrs. Poindexter tomorrow afternoon at two-thirty.

As the answering machine beeped three times signaling the end of her messages, she threw her head back in the chair and screamed with all the bottled up anger boiling inside her. It didn't help of course, but she did it anyway. The nerve of the man was implacable! He acted as though she were a four-year-old, too young to make her own decisions, too young to handle a task given to her, too young to be left alone without constant supervision, too young to defy him.

Well, fuck you William Templeton. This was one time when she *would* defy him. She couldn't meet with Mrs. Poindexter tomorrow afternoon at two-thirty. She would be at Addison House by then and new guests would be arriving at three.

It was a small step, she knew, in proving her life didn't revolve around William and his wishes but it was a step nevertheless. She let things go too far and it was time to put her foot down and take control. She couldn't leave her cottage, wouldn't give it up for some fancy temple. Her cottage had become a part of her and although she relented for a time—filling the rooms with the luxurious things her mother so loved—she was amidst a complete renovation.

As she gazed around her living room, a sense of coziness enveloped her, drawing her in. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced since shortly after she moved into the cottage. All the glamour, all the expensive furnishings and decorations took away the homey heart of the cottage. Even in her own place, she had been pretending. But not anymore, she realized with a growing sense of strength. She was taking steps, finding herself again, and it felt incredible!

She purchased her cottage a little over a year ago. That had been her first step, she mused, and one she never once regretted. It was small—, one bedroom, one bath, a kitchen and a large living room set

on a yard the size of a postage stamp just outside of the city— but she made the down payment with her own money, not money from the trust fund account she rarely touched. The outside was bright yellow; the inside decked in smoky gray carpet and purple paint-splashed tile. The colors suited her, the *real* her fighting to get out, as did the new furniture. Absently, she rubbed a hand over what she came to think of as her writing chair. The smooth velvet felt comforting, welcoming. Much better than the overpriced designer crap she'd had before.

Gone were the furnishings by Italian designer Antonio Citterio. In its place was a five-piece set that could've been designed by Kermit the Frog for all she knew, all she cared. It was a comfy, cushiony smoky gray with black swirls and fit both her and her cottage. That was what mattered now. Her office chair was upholstered in a deep purple with silver buttons and sat before a large black corner desk holding her computer, all-in-one printer and everything else she used in the creation and promotion of a novel. A black entertainment center housed her TV, DVD, and stereo against one wall across from the sofa.

Two end tables completed the furniture in the living room, one on either side of the sofa, and a matching coffee table, each of them round and made of black painted metal and black and white speckled marble tops. Two lamps of black iron on deep gray stone bases and positioned on the end tables provided the needed light for the room. Books, heavy metal CDs and candles varying in scents and colors added character and replaced the sculptures and thousand dollar trinkets that once filled the open spaces.

But her favorite personal touch by far were the posters of Façade she'd dared to frame and line an inch apart along one wall. To some, it would look like something out of a teenager's bedroom rather than the living room in a twenty-eight year old woman's home. To Alicia, it was art—much more beautiful, true to life, more of a symbol of herself than any art gallery paintings.

And to William, it's trash, she reminded herself. He said as much

more times than she could count in the few short weeks since she completed the room's transformation. Just like her heavy metal shirts and black leather boots she loved to wear, her metal CDs she loved to listen to. She would lose the freedom to have, to wear and enjoy it all if she married him. Her stomach churned at the thought.

Swallowing the urge to vomit, she lunged for the phone on the end table, punched in Diana's cell number from memory. Though she and Diana had been best friends nearly all their lives, there had been a time when she hadn't been able to pick up the phone and call her friend for reinforcements. In Alicia's quest to keep her deathbed promise to her Grandmother, she alienated Diana almost completely. The model Addison daughter Alicia became had nothing in common with Diana—a woman who was a mirror image of the girl Alicia used to be, the woman on the inside screaming to get out. But in past months, as Alicia began to find herself again, the attachment between friends had been reconnected.

“Get over here and bring loads of chocolate,” she said when Diana answered. “It's a forget-the-calorie night.”

“I'll be there in an hour.” Diana's laugh was rich and throaty as she broke the connection.

* * * *

She showed up like clockwork an hour later with chocolate covered donuts, Dove chocolate bars, rocky road ice cream and Chinese food. “I thought we should eat something healthy before we tank up on chocolate.” She pushed the sides of her free-flowing straight scarlet hair behind her ears and began to unload the contents of the bags on the coffee table. “We have cashew chicken, pepper steak and onions, sweet and sour pork, fried rice and egg rolls. Grab some forks.”

“Damn Diana, you didn't tell me you were inviting the US Army to my house for dinner.” Alicia laughed, returning from the kitchen

with silverware, napkins, glasses and a bottle of Alsace white wine her parents gave her for a pre-birthday gift.

“Girl, if I had invited anyone US it would be the Navy. Those butts in those tight white pants...” She smacked her siren red lips. “Now that's what I call dinner.”

“You are incorrigible.” Still laughing, Alicia settled on the floor, popped the cork on the wine bottle. She poured two glasses and slid one across the tabletop to her friend.

“Shit! That's what I forgot. How could I forget?”

“Forget what?”

“The bubbly. We should have champagne tonight.” Diana said it as if Alicia should have guessed.

Alicia grabbed for the cashew chicken and began eating straight from the container. “I thought you were coming over to wallow in my sorrows with me not to celebrate them.”

“Our celebrating has nothing to do with sorrows and everything to do with success my dear. We'll celebrate first. You know, lift your spirits with the good stuff before you fill me in on why in Goddess's name you have that hideous thing on your finger.”

Alicia glanced down at the engagement ring and winced. “You noticed it, huh?”

“It's impossible to miss,” Diana said around a mouthful of pepper steak and onions. “I want to know everything but first let me tell you my news.” She put down her fork, stood and twirled in a circle, her ankle length olive drab broom skirt flaring out around her. “You are looking at the new manager of All Things Magical.”

“Holy shit! You're kidding.” Alicia leapt to her feet, threw her arms around Diana and they did a happy dance together across the living room floor. It was what Diana had been hoping for, what she worked for and after five years of employment she finally had it. She deserved it too. She'd gone to college, double majoring in retail and business management, with the exclusive goal of one day managing the New Age shop.

“Mr. Chamberlain called me into the office this morning,” Diana said as they settled at the table again. The thin silver bracelets on her arm clanged lightly as she reached for an egg roll. “The battle ax is history,” she said of the elderly woman who managed the shop for as long as anyone could remember.

“He fired her?” Having enough of the assortment of Chinese food, Alicia placed a palm on the carpet behind her, leaned back and sipped her wine. Though she knew next to nothing about selecting the appropriate wine to accompany a meal, the light sweet taste of the Alsace seemed to perfectly complement the dinner.

Diana shook her head, pausing to swallow the last bite of the egg roll. “He didn't exactly fire her. At least, I don't think he did,” she amended, grabbing for her own wine glass. “I believe he talked her into retirement. She's getting too old, too forgetful and out of touch with the latest market demands to keep the shop running smoothly.”

“That's in addition to the fact that the majority of the clientele and all of the employees can't stand her.”

“So true, so true. Yours truly, included. Mr. Chamberlain is giving me free reign of the place Ali,” she said in a mixture of relief and exhilaration. “I'll finally be able to put all those ideas I've had to use. Starting with you.”

“Me?”

“Yes you. I want to set up a signing and I want to start carrying your books in the store. Did I tell you we've had a few customers come in asking for your Blood Diaries series?”

“No! You didn't tell me.” Self-gratification exploded through her veins. She long ago grew accustomed to inquiries about her books through e-mails but to hear someone physically walked into a store requesting her work was more than a pleasant surprise.

“Well, they did. I told them your books had to be ordered off the Internet, that they couldn't be bought outright unless they could catch you at a signing.”

“Which no one around here will host for me,” Alicia muttered in

angered desperation. Resident author or not, local business didn't want to take a chance on an unknown author with non-returnable books.

"Then," Diana continued as if she hadn't heard Alicia, "they demanded to know why we had never had you as a special guest in our store."

"Did you tell them because the battle ax doesn't view me as a real author because I'm not published by a major New York publishing house?" Alicia still couldn't believe the old bat said that to her. Of all the nerve!

"Forget the old twit." Diana waved a hand dismissively. "I'm in charge now. I want to hold a signing for you. We'll run ads in the paper, use the local author angle to our advantage. I'll talk to Dax at the radio station," she said, now on a roll with ideas. "Maybe he can mention something on the air waves. We'll add it to our own usual radio commercial for the store too, of course."

"Who's ordering the books, you or me?" Alicia topped off their wine glasses as she mentally ran through the stock she kept in the closet. She would need to order more.

"I can order a small stock. You will probably want to have more on hand should we happen to need them. We'll draw up a consignment contract just for legalities. It will be so cool! I was thinking we could get the cover of your latest *Blood Diaries* novel blown up and..."

Alicia watched her friend with growing love as she continued to ramble on about her ideas. Sure, having the book signing would be a good move to draw in business for All Things Magical. As a New Age shop, their stock included Wiccan, Pagan and magical needs as well as books ranging from vampire fiction such as *The Blood Diaries* to that of the metaphysical and more. But Diana was doing this for her. To help her sell books, gain more name recognition, to help her reach her dreams. She couldn't ask for a better friend, she mused. And to think she lost sight of that for so long.

“Thank you.” Her softly spoken words had Diana's cheerful babbling stuttering to a stop. Tears blurred her vision and she ruthlessly blinked them away.

“Hey.” Diana reached across the table, laid a hand over hers. “I'm doing this for both of us. It's going to be great! Now, tell me what rooster laid a golden egg on your finger and why.”

Alicia groaned and lunged for the box of chocolate covered donuts. “Did you know that women eat so much chocolate because they are subconsciously using it as a substitute for sex?” She pulled a donut from the box, took a large bite. She passed the box to Diana, noted her friend now stared at her as if she had cracked her gored.

“You're joking, right?” Diana reached in the box, pulled out a donut.

“No, I'm serious. I was surfing the net the other day. I don't remember exactly what I was looking for but I came across this article about sex and chocolate.” She polished off the donut and went for a Dove bar. “Apparently, a New Zealand psychotherapist did a study and discovered that chocolate releases the same endorphins in the brain as sex.”

“Wow!” Diana eyed her donut, turned it in her fingers then took another bite. She chewed slowly, thoughtfully. “Nope, sorry, I don't feel any different. I still want sex.”

Alicia laughed. “Yeah, me too. But I want great sex. You know, the kind that leaves you all hot and sweaty and breathless?”

“Is there any other kind?”

“There is with William Templeton.” Alicia heaved a sigh. “If that man ever broke a sweat during sex the President would have to declare a state of emergency.”

“Then why pray tell are you wearing his ring? That's just a fancy promise ring or something silly like that, right? I mean, it isn't an engagement ring, is it?”

“It is. We're engaged. At least until he returns from Las Vegas.” She bit off a huge chunk of the Dove bar, allowed the sweet chocolate

to melt in her mouth.

“What is he doing in Vegas?”

“Business,” Alicia answered blandly. “He won't be back for a least a week, maybe two. So, until that time, I am an engaged woman.” Absently, she began fiddling with the foil wrapper of the Dove bar, twisting it until it took on the shape of a long thin rope before balling it up and rolling it between her palms. “It's probably a good thing he's out of town for a few days. It will give me some time to figure out how I'm going to get myself out of this.”

Diana laughed but there was no humor in it. “I'm still trying to figure out how you got yourself into it!”

“I don't know. It all happened so fast. We were at Chateau de Meraux with my parents, Star and Paul. One minute, everyone was talking and the next William was on one knee in front of me sliding this hideous thing on my finger.” She thumped the diamond then winced at the jolt of pain that shot through her fingertip. “I didn't have time to react. I was stunned speechless and not in a good way.”

“He knew you would be. That's why he decided to ask you in front of your family. He knew you wouldn't say no with them there.”

“You're probably right.”

“So, you're really going to call it off?” The skepticism in Diana's voice had Alicia wincing again.

“I have to! I can't spend the rest of my life married to a man like William. Just the thought makes me sick.”

“What about your mother?”

Alicia unfolded the wrapper, smoothed it out and began to twist it again. “You know that study I was telling you about, the one about the chocolate? There was another part I didn't mention. Did you know you can tell how good a person will be in bed by what they do with their wrappers?”

“You're evading my question.” Diana narrowed her eyes, angled her head, and pursed her lips. “But you've also sparked my curiosity. Tell me more.”

“I can't remember everything it said. There was a chart analyzing everything possible you could do with a candy wrapper from balling it up to twisting and folding. Each act had an explanation of the subject's sexual expertise. For example, if a person folds them it's said that person is more concerned with the quality of sex. They like the whole package, seduction, romance and technique.”

“And if they twist them before turning them into a ball?” Diana's gaze flicked to Alicia's now balled up wrapper.

Alicia sighed, tossed the foil toward the trashcan by her desk. It missed. “Twisting is an indication that one is need of some serious TLC. Balling it up says they are bored with their sex life.” She sat up, leaned back on her hands. “I don't want to be a baller and twister for the rest of my life, Diana. I want to be a folder. I am a folder!” She glanced toward the ball of foil on the carpet next to the trashcan. “Usually. But I can't be a folder with a man like William Templeton.”

Diana's lips twitched. She crawled on her hands and knees to sit beside Alicia, reached out to stroke her hair. “You will be a folder again.” Her tone was both comforting and loaded with amusement. “It's your life, Alicia. If you don't want to marry William then don't do it. Forget about what he will think, what your mother will say, and call off this damn engagement.”

Chapter Two

Covering for Star wasn't as easy as she made it seem. In the year since she'd last stepped in for her sister, Alicia managed to forget how much work was involved in keeping the bed and breakfast running smoothly. Then there were the emergencies to cap off the work. Of all days for the normal operations at Addison House to become disrupted it had to be today.

Alicia arrived at the B and B a little before noon. Star left soon after to meet Paul at the airport leaving notes, lists of instructions and requests, and a trail of floral perfume. The house had been empty of guests, each out taking in the sights and doing their own things. Only the staff: cook, housekeeper, gardener and butler, remained. Tasks and chores had been running rather smoothly until the housekeeper, Debby, suddenly became violently sick. Alicia was to learn that the middle-aged woman complained to Wilma, the cook, about feeling poorly when she reported to work that morning but refused to take the day off.

Not knowing exactly what ailed Debby, Alicia changed into a pair of black spandex shorts and an old Façade T-shirt and dug into cleaning. She had been more concerned with sterilizing the house and putting it to rights than what the guests would think of her heavy metal t-shirt. Good thing too because the Stewarts arrived to check in just as she finished the cleaning. And there she was, dirty, smelly, metal t-shirt and all, showing the new guests to their room and explaining the ways of Addison House. Star would have been appalled!

Later, as she stood in the shower, the hot water beating on her

head, she mentally ran through her schedule for the next day. With Debby out sick there would be no one to do the cleaning again tomorrow. She knew the one and only time Debby had been out in the past Wilma covered for her. But the cook had her own chores and responsibilities and Alicia simply couldn't see the point in overloading the woman.

So she would pull maid service again tomorrow, she decided, squeezing a dime drop of fragranced body wash on a sponge. It was no big deal. A little physical labor never hurt anyone. It would be a relatively light day, too. No guests would be checking in or out. She would simply have to be sure her present guests had fresh bathroom linens, clean sheets and other items that Addison House provided.

She thought briefly about the guests—her guests, for as long as she was in charge anyway—as she lathered the body wash on the sponge, massaged it over her entire body. The Stewarts were a nice couple. She liked them on the spot. They were middle-aged, late forties or early fifties, she guessed. In the short half hour she spent with them she learned their recent union was the second for both of them. Together they were the proud parents of six children and a dog, recently purchased a new house spacious enough to accommodate their large family, and gave up the sports cars in exchange for two minivans. They sounded like the freaking Brady Bunch!

Her other guests, the Badcocks, had been out all day and yet to return by the time she closed herself in her room to shower and change. Unless the couple returned for cocktails in the gathering room tonight it was possible she may not meet them before breakfast in the morning.

And what about her other guest, she wondered, stepping under the showerhead to rinse. With slow, caressing movements, she slid her hands down her neck, over her breasts, down her stomach and between her legs. Her body reacted marginally to her own touch, a light burning igniting deep within her. She ignored it. She wouldn't find the satisfaction her body craved unless she gave it to herself and

right now time did not allow. Turning off the shower, she grabbed for a towel and continued with her thoughts. Had Mr. Smith, or whoever he was, decided not to show? He could've had the decency to call if he decided to cancel.

“Men! They can be so inconsiderate,” she grumbled. No matter. If he didn't show it would simply be one less guest to contend with. From Star's relay of her conversation with the man he sounded like a picky pain in the ass anyway. All his questions and privacy issues. Get a grip, dude!

Alicia quickly blow dried her hair, pulled its long strands back in a stylish twist, applied a small amount of make-up to her fair skin and dressed in the black knee-length skirt and purple cashmere blouse she selected from her suitcases. She moved into the sitting area in the suite of rooms she chose for her stay. The rooms were in Star and Paul's private wing of the house on the main floor.

Classy and tasteful, just like everything Star came in contact with, the rooms were decorated in rich colors of browns and orange. The bed was king size with an ornately pierced lacework headboard. A matching armoire, full-length mirror, two bedside tables and an antique Escritoire writing table completed the furnishings in the bedroom. The sitting room sported the same colors and held only a down cushioned wing chair and oversized down filled sofa.

It was ten minutes to seven, she noted as she slid her black honeycomb stocking feet in a pair of black three-inch heels. Cocktail hour was set to begin at seven. Mindful of her heels on the plush carpet, she walked to the full-length mirror inside the bedroom. The reflection that stared back at her was that of a professional, well-groomed businesswoman.

Star would be proud, she mused. She chose the outfit with exactly that in mind. A bit of a mental apology for greeting the new guests earlier in the day in the clothes her sister detested.

The Stewarts chatted with another couple Alicia assumed to be the Badcocks when she entered the gathering room minutes later. “Sorry

I'm late." She plastered her best brilliant smile to her lips.

Norman Stewart stole a glance at his Rolex. "Actually, I believe we're early."

"We helped ourselves to your bar. I hope you don't mind. I'm Bradley Badcock." He shifted a Gibraltar glass of brown liquid to his left hand and extended his right as he stepped toward her.

He was a fairly handsome in a Mario Lopez sort of way. Dark curly hair cut short to tame, soft brown eyes and sun-kissed skin. He wasn't muscular like Mario Lopez but slim with a flattering natural build. He wore a white polo style shirt with tight-fitting gray slacks and gray loafers. His handshake was light but firm and held on a bit too long for Alicia's comfort.

Though she continued to smile, Alicia couldn't resist a quick casual glance down. For his bride's sake, she was pleased to see a sizable bulge in his trousers. If his cock was bad as his namesake suggested it was due to lack of technique and certainly not from lack of size.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Badcock. And please, feel free to help yourself to the bar whenever you wish. As a guest of Addison House it's more yours than mine," she said as she casually pulled her hand from his grasp. "I trust you and your wife are enjoying your stay." She saw from the startled expression on his face her subtle reminder hit home.

He cleared his throat, his hand falling back to his side before extending out again. His fingers curled in and out in a come here gesture. A woman of about twenty-three walked into his arm. She was tall, slender and big breasted. Her hair was sunshine blond, long and ironing board straight. She reminded Alicia of Britney Spears with larger breasts.

"We have enjoyed our stay very much." Bradley pulled the blond so close even air couldn't get between them. "This is my wife, Gloria."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Gloria. May I congratulate you both

on your recent marriage?”

“Thank you.” Gloria smiled lovingly at her husband.

Bradley Badcock only flashed her a quick glance before his attention returned to Alicia. She didn't like the way he looked at her—as though she were a smorgasbord in a private fancy restaurant and he were the only customer. Gloria didn't seem to notice. Still, sympathy for his new bride sprang anew. If Gloria was expecting fidelity Alicia suspected the woman married the wrong man.

“If you would pardon me for a moment, I think I'll have a glass of wine.” Alicia forced herself to walk casually across the hardwood floor to the fully stocked wet bar next to the fifty-two inch television rather than run to it as her legs wanted. Being admired was one thing, being gawked at and by a newly married younger man was quite another. With steady hands, she chose a vintage red, sipped and marveled at the taste. Star did know her wine.

“Star told us you are recently engaged.” Gloria turned to beam at Alicia.

The wine turned bitter in Alicia's mouth. Damn Star and her big mouth!

“Well, it seems congrats are due all around.” Norman grinned, moved to the bar to refill his glass.

“She said your ring is absolutely breathtaking,” Gloria continued, allowing herself to be led by her husband to the luxurious Newbury leather sofa. “I would love to see it. I'm a huge fan of anything that glitters. Of course, as a woman I'm sure you feel the same.”

Actually, I think it's a waste of money and perfectly good stones and minerals. Alicia stopped herself just short of saying it aloud. She took another sip of her wine, steeling a glance at her finger as she rose the glass to her lips. She forgot to put the ring back on after her shower. She saw it in her mind's eye lying on the edge of the sink where she took it off. She pictured it rocking from side to side as if caught in an earthquake then tumbling off the edge and into the sink, down the drain.

"It definitely glitters," she said dryly as the mental picture flashed to show her the ring lying safe and sound exactly where she left it. Unfortunately, she knew that was how she would find it when she returned to her room. The damn thing was too big to fit down the drain anyway.

The suspicious glances she saw pass between the four guests propelled her to lighten her tone. A bride-to-be was supposed to be happy about it, right? "The ring was a bit too large for my finger," she lied. "I had to return it to the jewelry store for sizing." She hated lying but sometimes, in certain situations, a lie was better than the truth. Thankfully, the lie seemed to satisfy her guests well enough.

"Will there be anyone else joining us for the remainder of our stay?" Bradley asked conversationally. He sat on the sofa, one arm stretched behind his wife, one ankle propped on the knee of the opposite leg.

Alicia walked to the fireplace, studied the trinkets that lined the mantel. They were much like those she boxed up at her cottage. She made a mental note to bring the boxes to Star. Her sister could add them to her own collection.

"There was a single man who booked a reservation." She refused to turn, refused to meet the sexually overheated gaze of Bradley Badcock again. "He was scheduled to check in this afternoon but apparently he had a change of plans."

It wasn't long before the Badcocks and Stewarts fell into a conversation of their own. Though Bradley Badcock was young, it was obvious to Alicia he'd been reared for power. He seemed to have no difficulty keeping up with Norman Stewart on various subjects ranging from politics to business and everything in between.

Unlike her husband, Stella Stewart was content to be quiet, Alicia noted as she listened to the conversations with only half an ear. It wasn't until Gloria got Stella started talking about hers and Norman's children that she seemed to come to life. The petite woman with short cropped auburn hair and hazel eyes, didn't drink. By the time the little

gathering decided to break for the night she was the most sober person in the room.

Alicia stayed behind to clean the evidence of the evening's cocktail hour—hours, she corrected, noting it was nearly eleven o'clock—as the guests retreated to their rooms. She rarely turned in herself before two in the morning but she felt the wine she consumed taking effect. Combined with the early hour in which she woke, the early hour she would have to wake again in the morning and the day's physical labor and stress, she would be lucky to make it to midnight before she crashed tonight.

She paused in the doorway to the gathering room, made a quick sweep with her eyes. Everything appeared to be in order. She flicked off the lights, plunging the room into total darkness just before two narrow beams of light shot through the window. Headlights? She wondered, flicking the lights back on. She waited, listened. The servants had retired to their quarter's hours ago. She was alone on the main floor of the house surrounded by silence. She heard a sound in the distance, a car door slamming, and moments later the doorbell chimed. She didn't have a clue who it could be. Star hadn't told her of any guests who would be arriving in the middle of the night.

Her thought switched to Mr. Smith. He was the only guest she knew of who skipped out on their reservation. Maybe he hadn't skipped out after all but merely took the liberty of changing his arrival time without notifying anyone at Addison House.

Alicia gritted her teeth and stomped to the door, her heels hitting the hardwood floor with such force she was sure the sound could be heard outside. Ready to give the inconsiderate pain in the ass Mr. Smith a piece of her mind, she jerked open the door and froze. Her heart hammered in her chest. All the heated words she had been ready to say died on her tongue. She couldn't move as she gazed into the milk chocolate eyes of Derek Kadin.

He looked at her with an intensity that was hypnotizing. As she watched, his gaze dropped to her mouth and she imagined he wanted

to kiss her. It was a body language used in countless romance novels and it always preceded a passionate kiss. And how often did a woman in a romance novel open a door and fall into a man's arms, into a passionate kiss? All the time! It was one of the many sad differences that separated fiction from reality.

He licked his lips, a slow easy slide of his tongue that sent tingles of awareness to her very core. She felt her nipples tighten, felt the throbbing of lust begin between her legs. He mentioned several times on the band's Internet post board he often became aroused while performing by a certain look from a certain type of woman in the crowd. She knew now exactly what he meant.

She watched his eyes change. Watched the surprise, the attraction, the need wash over him and silently thanked the powers that be that she was still holding onto the door as her legs began to liquefy. What she didn't see in his eyes was recognition. He didn't remember her. She fought the jab of disappointment at the realization. They only met once, three months ago, for a total of about three minutes. She had been one of hundreds of women he met that day and she knew she looked completely different with her hair pulled back and clad in dressy businesswoman attire than she had with her free-flowing hair, Façade tee and blue jean shorts. How could she expect him to remember her?

"Hello," he said softly in that smooth, oh so sexy, oh so Derek Kadin voice she loved.

The single word was like a tongue in her ear and had the same erotic effect on her body. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think! She tried to form an appropriate single sentence to say in her mind but failed. Finally she managed a weak hello and was afraid he heard every sexual sensation she was feeling in the tone of her voice.

He's just a man. He's just a man. The silent chant came back to her in its relentless repeat. It prevented her from becoming a drooling, babbling idiot the last time but last time they had been surrounded by thousands of people. This time they were alone and, just a man or not,

the man was standing only an arm's reach away.

"Mrs. Addison?" he asked.

Her head bobbed up and down stupidly.

"I'm Derek Smith. I apologize for arriving so late. The drive took longer than I expected."

"It's—" She paused, swallowed, attempted to reach some level of composure. "It's no problem. Please, come in." She stepped aside, pushed the door open wider allowing him room to enter.

He stepped inside the foyer, a suitcase in each hand. She closed the door, stole a look at his ass as he passed by her. She only meant to glance but once her gaze landed on those firm buttocks clad in skin-tight pants of black and brown leopard print she couldn't tear her eyes away. Not until he turned to face her and she realized she was now staring at his crotch. Her gaze jumped to his face.

Busted! He caught her. She knew it by the amusement she saw in his eyes, the slow lazy smile that curved his succulent lips, and felt all the heat in her body rise to redden her cheeks.

She searched quickly for something to say, some way to play off the not so subtle appraisal she had been giving the lower half of his body and settled for the first nonsexual thing that came to mind. "I'm sorry you're forced to carry your own luggage. We have servants that usually do that for our guests but they have turned in for the night."

"It's okay. I usually travel light." He was still smiling. His gaze never wavered from her face.

God, she couldn't think when he looked at her like that! Like he wanted to toss away the suitcases, back her against the wall and fuck her until she screamed.

Hello, reality check! This was Derek Kadin, the famous, utterly desirable, heavy metal heartthrob Derek Kadin, not some handsome Joe Doe off the street. The man could have nearly any woman he desired. Why would he want to fuck her?

"I could wake them..."

"Not unless you have something you would rather do than keep

me company until I get settled in,” he interrupted her. His eyes sparkled with sexual innuendo.

Sweet Jesus! Maybe he was the one who needed the reality check.

The only thing I would rather do is you. “Let me get the key to your room,” Alicia said quickly, before she let the truth spill out. “Would you like something to drink? Soda, water, coffee...” She nearly said Crown but decided on the word alcohol instead. He registered under an assumed name because he desired privacy, anonymity. So far, she didn't believe he realized she knew who he really was but if she pinpointed what she knew to be his favorite choice of alcohol she may give herself away.

“Alcohol, please.”

Careful not to walk too close to him, knowing she would lose the bit of composure she managed to find if she did, she moved toward the gathering room doorway. “There is a fully stocked bar in there. Help yourself and I will go get the key.”

“Can I fix you one while I'm at it?”

It wasn't until then that she realized all the effects of the wine she drank earlier in the evening deserted her the instant she opened the door to find Derek Kadin on the porch. “Yes, please. I'll have whatever you're having.” She knew it would be Crown Royal and she normally didn't care for the hard brown liquors but right now she needed something strong.

* * * *

Derek watched her walk away, admired the way her hips swayed with each step, until she disappeared from sight. He let out a soft chuckle and shook his head to rid himself of the vision as he entered through the wide double doorway of the room she had indicated. It was a large room, comfortably but elegantly decorated, and he spotted the bar immediately, made his way to it.

The bar was a dark crafted wood with a cabinet and drawer on

each end, a refrigerator and wine cabinet in the middle. He opened the cabinet to his left and found bottles of vodka, gin, rum and other white liquors. Closing it, he reached for the cabinet on his right. Ah yes, the dark liquors and right in front was a full bottle of Crown Royal.

He selected two Gibraltar glasses from the half dozen arranged on the glass rack above the bar and poured a shot of the Crown into one. He drank the shot quickly, rolling his head back to feel the full effect of the alcohol as it burned down his throat. He poured another for good measure, repeated the process before pulling a small tub of ice from the refrigerator. He put two cubes in each glass and filled them a half-inch from the rim.

Picking up the glass he poured for himself, he turned from the bar to wait for his hostess, his very beautiful hostess. Images of her opening the door, staring at him as he entered the house, walking away from him in the foyer, flashed through his mind like a slide show. She wasn't the most beautiful woman he ever seen but she came close.

He caught her staring at him when he turned around after entering the house. Though he hadn't been certain at first, he thought she was staring at his crotch. When her eyes met his again and her cheeks turned that amazing shade of crimson, he had known for sure.

He'd embarrassed her, he knew, but her appraisal of his groin had been as equally unexpected as being greeted by such a striking woman. He hadn't really thought about who owned Addison House. The woman he spoke with on the phone stuck him as a well-mannered society type—friendly with a nice enough voice but not enough to arouse suspicions about her physical appearance. He knew she was married. She told him a bit about the history of the bed and breakfast and how she and her husband came to the decision of opening it during their brief conversation. But he hadn't seen a ring on the woman's finger tonight. After his body's reaction to her on sight, he made it a point to look.

The first thing he noticed was her eyes. They were blue with a hint of green, the color of water in the deepest depths of the ocean. Her hair was a deep tawny brown. God, he loved brunettes! He wondered how long it was. He hadn't been able to tell from the French twist style she wore.

Nice breasts, he noted, remembering the way her purple blouse stretched loosely over them. Not too big and certainly not too small. He raised his glass to his lips, wondering briefly how well those breasts would fit in his hands. Her narrow hips led to a set of perfectly curved hips and a pair of incredible legs. Standing close, she'd been almost an inch taller than he. Subtracting about three inches for the heels, she would be about five-foot-five. Five-foot-five and all legs, he mused. Slim, shapely legs that made him wonder how they would look propped on his shoulders as he...

Whoa! Don't go there.

He stepped away from the bar and began surveying the room—anything to keep that last image from forming fully in his mind. He came to Addison House to get away from it all, not to find a woman, a lover. He'd been going stir crazy in his apartment back in Philadelphia. The tour ended a little over a month ago and at first it felt great to be home. But it hadn't taken long for him to realize if he wanted silence and privacy he would have to get away for a while.

Though a part of him was already missing the stage, he wasn't yet missing the limelight. He hadn't had time to miss it, he reminded himself. In Philadelphia, he was recognized nearly everywhere he went. Between friends, family and fans he had been unable to find the slightest bit of solitude.

He loved it, he admitted, the recognition he and his band members gained over the years and yet he craved more. His musical career meant more to him than merely selling CDs. It offered him the chance to communicate his ideas, his beliefs, his feelings through the songs he wrote and he constantly strived to share those songs with as many people as possible.

Still, there were times when the need to escape it all overwhelmed him, times when he simply needed a break. He had disappeared before. He never left for longer than a week or two but his absence usually did the trick. With any luck, he would find that break this time at Addison House.

Lost in his own thoughts, he wandered to the Steinway and Son's grand piano on the far side of the room placed away from the sitting area and fireplace. He ran his fingers over its delicate keys. Garrett would love this, he thought, and could almost hear the melodies his guitarist could pull out of a piano.

His other band members came to mind and he wondered briefly what they were doing. They kept in touch when not on tour, of course, and they knew he made his escape to Addison House. He spoke with Reese only hours before leaving town and hadn't been surprised to hear the drummer was considering a little vacation of his own. Garrett was busy working on the house he was building and Trey seemed to be content with his pregnant girlfriend.

A wave of dread washed over him as he considered Trey. At the news of Morgan's pregnancy, Derek had been delighted for his friend. But as time progressed he began to sense changes in Trey, changes he feared would lead to the band being forced to find a new bass player. He hadn't voiced his fears to Garrett and Reese and hoped his dread was simply a product of his overactive imagination. But what if it wasn't?

He pushed the question from his mind, refusing to stress over it at this point. If Trey decided to leave the band he, along with Garrett and Reese, would deal with it at that time. That was all they could do.

* * * *

He stood at the piano, a glass of Crown in one hand while he lightly touched the piano keys with the other. Alicia paused in the doorway still unable to believe she was alone with Derek Kadin. He

didn't see her. He appeared to be in his own world. And was she in hers? Could that explain this?

She had been alone with Derek Kadin only in her dreams. It was a place where only the two of them existed, a place where the only sound was that of their breaths and heartbeats. The house was quiet enough now to duplicate that atmosphere. If she stepped close enough to him, she would be able to hear his breathing, hear his heartbeat and he hers.

So, was she dreaming? Probably. And pity the poor soul that woke her from this glorious moment in time.

As if he sensed her presence, he looked up. Their gazes locked, fused together for several mesmerizing seconds. She walked to him, mentally ordering her body not to shake, her hands not to fidget, her legs not to give out on her as she stopped opposite him at the piano. His face was blank, completely unreadable, but his eyes never left hers.

She took a nervous breath and prayed her voice would be steady when she spoke. It was. "Do you play?" She pointedly glanced at the piano. She knew he didn't play any type of instrument. His voice was all the musical talent he needed. Still, it was a normal question to ask someone you didn't know when you found him admiring a grand piano.

She contemplated the situation while getting the keys for the room and decided it best to keep her knowledge of his true identity a secret for now. Anonymity was what he wanted after all. And maybe, just maybe, she could get something she wanted from his stay at Addison House in return.

Sex with Derek Kadin? Yeah, she wanted that. Hell yes, she wanted that! But sex wasn't truly what she was after. Her other dream, different from the secluded silent paradise with just the two of them, was to have a conversation with him. She got the impression from listening to him talk in interviews, reading posts he made on the band's post board, that he was a highly intelligent, down-to-earth

individual and she wanted to experience that first hand.

She knew nearly everything there was to know about Derek Kadin vocalist for Façade. Yet, she only knew what he wanted his fans to know about him. She wanted the chance to know the other Derek Kadin, the man behind the fame, the man inside the incredibly breathtaking, arousing exterior. As long as she allowed him to act as if he were any other man, led him to believe she didn't know different, she could possibly get him to open up to her during his stay. But if he found out the truth she was certain he would close up tighter than an oyster in a shell.

"No, but Gar—" He stopped, glanced away, looked back at her again. "I have a good friend that does. He's very talented."

Yes, he is. She knew he meant Garrett Henry. He nearly said so before correcting himself. "You'll have to tell him about Addison House. Maybe he will pay us a visit sometime. I love good piano music. It's so soothing, like strolling in a spring breeze, the soft wind caressing your skin, the warmth of the sun as it seeps into you."

She saw his eyebrow rise ever so slightly, the amusement returning to his expression, and realized how sexual her description sounded.

"I'll do that," he said with a faint smile.

"Are you ready to see your room?"

"Sure." He walked quickly to the bar, returned and handed her a glass. "The ice melted a bit."

That's a good thing, she thought, staring into the glass. What had she been thinking!

"It's Crown. Straight," he added with a quirk of his lips. "You said you wanted whatever I was having. I can add some soda to it, tone down the bite."

"No, this is fine," she said quickly. She looked toward the bar, noted the half empty bottle of Crown he left sitting out. "Should we take the bottle with us?" she asked, making sure to grin so he understood she was teasing him.

He laughed and the sound was harmonious. It flowed through her, swirled around inside her, heightening her awareness of him. “It was a really long drive,” he said with a gleaming smile that said he understood.

Sweet heavens! Even the man's smile was orgasmic. She only noticed it a handful of times—a small curve of the lips in an interview, a short laugh on the band's DVD. He didn't smile enough, she decided. Not nearly enough.

She led him to the foyer, stopped at the two suitcases he left against the wall and reached to pick up one.

“What are you doing?”

Startled, she looked at him. “Helping you carry your luggage. You can't carry both of them and your drink.”

“Then you carry my drink and I'll carry the suitcases.”

The hairs on the back of Alicia's neck stood at attention as she began to escort him up the stairs. It was the feeling one got when someone was looking at them when they didn't know that someone was there, or in this case when that someone was watching them from behind. She could feel his gaze on her as she started to climb and suspected he was watching her ass. It would be directly in his viewpoint right about now, she mused. Did he like what he saw?

“You sound different than you did on the phone, Mrs. Addison,” he said in a conversational tone.

She stopped mid-way up the stairs and turned. He was two steps from her and she had to look down to meet his gaze. “That's because I'm not the same person you talked to. That was Star, my sister and the owner of Addison House. She had to go out of the country and asked me to watch over things while she's gone. I'm Alicia. And it's Ms.,” she added, seizing the opportunity to erase any doubts he might have as to her marital status. It was a lie but only a small one. She *was* engaged but that was only a technicality. She had every intention of dissolving that engagement at the first available occasion. She could see no reason for Derek to even know about it. “You can all me

Alicia.”

“And you can call me Derek.”

She was grateful for that. It would prevent her from slipping up and calling him Mr. Kadin rather than Smith. “It's a pleasure to meet you.”

His gaze did that slow tantalizing slide down her body and she nearly creamed in her underwear before the gaze returned to meet her eyes. “The pleasure is all mine, Alicia.”

The way he said her name, so articulate, so sultry, made her stomach flip-flop. Seconds that felt like hours passed as they stood on the staircase, heated gaze locked with heated gaze. She wanted to reach out, touch him, feel that slight stubble she saw on his jaw line under her fingertips, run her hand over his shaved head, and place her lips over his. But she didn't dare. Instead, she smiled shakily and turned to continue up the stairway.

“Star told me you were looking for privacy during your stay,” she said when they reached the second floor. “Of course, that is a priority concern at Addison House. She reserved what we call the Louis XIV room for you. It's our smallest but most secluded on the second floor. However, we have a room that has just been completed on the third floor. It sits alone and is much larger with far more amenities than the other. You would be the first to stay there if you decide.”

The idea struck her when she entered the office to retrieve the keys for the Louis XIV room. She took a peek at the room, Star's Paradise, earlier in the day while cleaning and its design, its feel had blown her away. She expected a frilly, traditional romance type décor intended for honeymoon couples and the like. What Star had done instead was sheer genius. A combination of traditional romance, business and modern elegant design, the possibilities for the room were endless rather than limiting it to one specific type of guest.

“You make it sound as if it's exactly what I'm looking for.”

“Then I'll show it to you first. I truly think you will find it more to your liking.” She led him to a shorter, narrower staircase that

stretched to the third floor. "If you don't agree, the other room is still available."

She unlocked the door at the top of the stairs, entered and stepped aside, flicking a light switch in the process. Two lamps that were so dark blue in color they nearly looked black came to life on either side of the multicolored Pollock sofa of dark purples, blues, and grays. Like most suites, the door opened into the sitting room. A chaise, the same dark blue as that in the sofa, a television set in a small entertainment center complete with a stereo and combination VCR/DVD player, and matching end tables and coffee table of glass tops set on wrought iron bases completed the furnishings. But it was the circular whirlpool bath for two that set the room apart from the sitting areas of the other rooms.

"Impressive." Derek sat the suitcases on the smoky gray-carpeted floor as he took in the room. "Certainly more than I expected."

"Your drink." Alicia held out the glass for him, watched as one muscular arm raised the glass to his lips, and longed to feel that arm wrapped around her. "The bedroom is through there." She followed him, heart racing, as he moved to the bedroom and switched on the light. Then there she was, Alicia Addison, alone in a bedroom with Derek Kadin. The mere thought of the possibilities made her light on her feet.

The bedroom was massive, the color scheme of the sitting room carrying to the doorway and through the larger room. The bed was king sized, the head and foot boards a weave of wrought iron. Two nightstands, an armoire, writer's desk and personal bar completed the room.

Alicia could tell by the expression on Derek's face that he was pleased with the rooms. She knew he would like the bed and tables from the sitting room the best. He was a fan of wrought iron. A magazine published a photo of the inside of his Philadelphia apartment once and she discovered he owned lots of wrought iron himself. When she saw this new room of Addison House and the

furnishings Star selected, Derek instantly came to mind. Little had she known then he would be the first guest to stay in the room.

“Did you want to see the other room before you decide?”

“No, I think you're right. This room is perfect,” he said with a slight nod as he continued to browse the room. “You seem to be a good judge of character, Alicia.”

I wouldn't be if I didn't know so much about you. “It's the goal of Addison House to make the guests happy,” she said instead.

He shot her a sexy glance over his shoulder. “Is it now?”

She gulped. Surely he didn't expect her to answer that!

He walked to the bar, opened the cabinets and came out with another bottle of Crown. “Looks like we didn't need to bring the bottle from downstairs after all,” he said as he topped off his glass.

Alicia had hardly touched hers, had forgotten she was holding it if the truth was known, but took a cautious sip now. She fought not to wince from the potency of the taste as it splashed down her throat, burning every inch of the way. She had to be careful. Too much of this and heaven only knew what she would be capable of.

“You said the other room was called the Louis XIV. What is this room called?”

“Star's Paradise.” At the intrigued look on his face, she turned to the set of light switches on the wall behind her. She pushed a knob, rotated it to the dim setting and flicked off the main switch. Dozens of tiny lights in the shape of stars came on above them. “Celestial ceiling,” she said, turning back to him.

He walked toward her but his attention was focused on the twinkling lights in the ceiling. By the time he stopped walking and looked to her again he stood only inches away. “Very romantic.”

Her body reacted to the soft timbre of his voice as though he touched her and, in a way, he had. She felt the warm breath from his words caress her face. He was standing that close! She straightened and the movement took away another half inch that separated them. Had she been able to breathe, she would have taken a few deep

inhales to calm her racing heart.

She managed a short, ragged breath and was blanketed by the smell of him. That didn't help. His innate male scent mixed with the faint smell of the Crown Royal and the cologne he wore to magnify the yearning inside her. There was just enough room between them for her to raise her glass and she did so, hoping the strong liquor would jolt her system to an act of normalcy. Of course, it didn't. Her thirst for this man was too great.

She searched for something to say but her lips seemed to have lost the ability to form words. She should say something professional, something that exuded confidence. She should tell him she hadn't meant to plunge them into such a romantic atmosphere by turning on the dim lights. She should tell him she had merely been showing him how the room earned its name. She was certain Star would use the celestial ceiling as the room's trademark in attracting guests. That's what she should tell him. Instead, she said nothing.

"You're very beautiful, Alicia," he said in that same low, tantalizing voice that sent her hormones on a roller coaster ride of ecstasy. He raised a hand, traced the outline of her cheek with the back of his index finger.

His touch was delicate, warm. She closed her eyes as all the electricity in her body gathered at that one point he touched and then fell through her body like the afterglow of fireworks on the darkest of nights.

Her eyes opened slowly as his hand dropped away. She stared at him and was shocked by the ferocity of want she detected in his eyes. He looked at her as though he wanted to kiss her, take her to bed and ravish her. And oh how she wanted him too.

Her thoughts must have been as transparent as his because in that instant he took a small step forward, enclosing the distance between them completely. She became acutely aware of each place their bodies touched as he slid an arm around her waist, pulling her closer still. Her heart caught in her throat as his lips brushed hers in a kiss so

tender, so light it felt like the softest of feathers. Places she didn't even know existed inside her began to tingle so violently she feared she would explode in his arms.

It was that fear that brought her back to the smallest level of reality. Her prim and proper twin fought her way to the surface. She would never stand in a darkened room with a man she didn't know and allow herself to be ravished. She wasn't that woman. She was Alicia Addison and she *did* know this man, at least in part anyway. She knew enough about him to want him to make love to her, to fuck her in any way he chose.

"We shouldn't do this," she said on a whisper and couldn't believe the words left her mouth.

He nodded, only the slightest of movement of his head, the slightest show of understanding but he released her, took a step back. "I apologize." His voice held a husky tone she never heard before.

"No, don't apologize. Please. It was..." Amazing, wonderful, orgasmic? "It was stimulating." It wasn't exactly the adjective she would have chose had she been able to think clearly but at least she hadn't said nice. Men hated the word nice. "I should go so you can get settled in. Breakfast is from eight to ten-thirty in the dining room. It's the room to your right at the foot of the stairs on the main floor. Or you can have it delivered to your room. There is a packet over there." She indicated the writing desk with a quick tilt of her head. "It includes a couple of things for you to sign as well as a menu and other information about the policies and procedures of Addison House. If you decide on room service, simply make your selections on the menu and hang it outside the door before you turn in for bed."

"Thank you." His tone was casual now and she knew they had returned to that of a guest and hostess status.

She nodded, smiled albeit shakily and turned to leave.

"Sweetheart."

The endearment stopped her in her tracks. She turned back to him and saw that dazzling sparkle of amusement return to his eyes.

“For everything,” he said, the words floating to her on a seductive ring. “It was *very* stimulating.”

* * * *

Alicia lay awake in her bed staring into the moonlit darkness, listening as the voice of Derek Kadin flowed softly to her from the speakers of the bedside stereo. Though the music was hard and heavy, the lyrics were serious, true to life, the voice so quintessentially male, so extraordinarily intimate it made anything he said, anything he sang erotic.

He had kissed her. She closed her eyes, raised a hand to her cheek, to her lips as she remembered his touch, so light, so incredibly sensuous. *We shouldn't do this*. Her own words echoed in her head. But she had wanted to do it, wanted to do so much more.

Slowly, she trailed a finger from her lips down her chin and neck to the valley between her breasts. But it wasn't her finger she pictured. It wasn't her finger she felt. It was Derek's. She saw it in the intimate picture that formed in the darkness behind her lids. She felt it as if she were still in the room upstairs with him. In her mind's eye, it was his finger that paused, backtracked then began again down her stomach to the narrow patch of dark curls between her legs.

The finger slid between the warm folds of her pussy and began a slow swim in the wetness it found there. It gently stroked the insides of her lips, circled the outside of the eagerly awaiting hole of her vagina. Her nipples tightened, her breath quickened as the finger plunged into her. She spread her legs, lifted her hips to meet the finger, adding another on the out slide before driving them harder, deeper inside her.

As the heat inside her intensified, it became increasingly difficult to hold onto her vision of Derek, to imagine that it were his fingers inside her rather than her own. She knew it was because her imagination could never compare to what it would really feel like to

have any part of him inside her.

She focused instead on the voice that now came more softly, more melodically from the speakers as Derek sang the band's one and only ballad. His voice flowed over her like a gentle wave, stroking her, seducing her, taking control of her fingers as they continued their in-out slide in her pussy, bringing her closer to climax with each thrust.

She brought her other hand down and found her clit with her fingertip. Her muscles began to contract around the fingers inside her as the finger of her other hand started a pressured circular movement on her clit. When she came, it was to the final word of the song as Derek's voice faded away.

Chapter Three

Alicia awoke the next morning at six, groggy from the restless night. A normal day would have had her rising in another hour, perhaps two, before curling up on her sofa with a book and her first cup of coffee. While drinking her second cup, she would eat a light breakfast and read over whatever scene in her novel she completed the previous day. By her third cup, she would settle in her writing chair to begin a new day's work.

Today would be anything but normal with a completely different list of tasks to be completed. No time to linger over that first cup of coffee, no time to read, no time to relax. She showered and dressed quickly, making record time in her transformation to the elegant hostess of Addison House, all the while going down her mental checklist of the day's chores.

The main floor was quiet as she entered the foyer and made her way to the staircase. She heard the bustle of pots and pans in the kitchen and knew Wilma had already begun preparing the morning's breakfast menu. She would be waiting for Alicia to tell her how many guests requested service and the items they selected. Her foot clad in a navy heel just hit on the first step when a voice from behind stopped her.

"Good morning, Ms. Alicia."

She turned to find Debby dressed in traditional maid attire standing outside the gathering room doorway. "Debby, I didn't expect you to report to work today." She stepped to the other woman, studied her close.

Debby stood a bit shorter than Alicia, only a few pounds shy of

being considered heavyset and ten years her senior. She wore her fireball red hair twisted in an old-fashioned bun at the back of her head causing her large round eyes to stand out. She was pale skinned with loads of freckles covering nearly every inch of visible skin. A few more to close in the gaps, Alicia mused, and she would have one hell of a tan.

“Shouldn't you be at home in bed?”

“I'm feeling myself again, Ms. Alicia,” Debby said in her light southern drawl. “Must've been a twenty-four hour bug or something. With your permission I would really like to return to work today.”

Did she expect Alicia to argue? Not a chance! With Debby back at work, her own task list would be cut by half. “If you truly feel you're up to it,” she agreed with a nod. “But if you start feeling ill again don't hesitate to say so.”

“Yes, Ms. Alicia. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. I have to get upstairs and gather the room service request before Wilma comes looking for me with a rolling pin in her hand.” Both women laughed, knowing it was something the hotheaded cook would do if provoked.

Alicia passed by the closed doors of the guestrooms on the second level, noting neither of them left a request for breakfast delivery. Her pulse escalated as she ascended the stairs to the third floor. Derek's door was closed as well but hanging outside it on a brass clip was his request for breakfast. She thought she would find one here. In his quest for solitude, she hadn't expected him to want to be grouped with the other guests in the dining room. At least not on his first day.

She removed the paper and paused. Was he awake in there? She wondered. Probably not. The hour was still early. Was he having as much trouble sleeping as she'd had? Was she invading his thoughts, his dreams the way he invaded hers? Probably not, she decided again and sighed, turning to make her way back downstairs. She was simply a woman grouped with scores of others who found Derek Kadin breathtakingly attractive and certainly not the first he had been

attracted to as well.

Derek loved women. He made no secret of that. Attraction held a lot of weight with him, or so he claimed in a response she read on the band's post board. He didn't view it as casual or something to be ignored. Each woman he found himself drawn to, each he had sex with, meant something to him. What, she had no idea but that was what he said.

As she walked to the kitchen, memories of the short time she spent in his room last night rushed back to her. She had been taken aback by the understanding she saw in his expression when she stopped their exploration of one another before it really even began. She didn't know what she had expected. Certainly not for him to grow angry, to ignore her request to stop, take her against her will, if the latter were even possible, she mused. No. Derek wasn't that type of man. Still, his obvious acceptance shocked her. It was an interesting note to put in the new mental notebook she was compiling on Derek Kadin, one she hoped to fill with facts on the *real* man and not simply the famed vocalist.

"You put a guest in the new room?" Wilma glared at Alicia through dark beady eyes. She was a woman in her mid-sixties, taller than most with salt and pepper hair Alicia rarely saw out of a hairnet. She was a fabulous cook, a dependable employee and one woman you didn't dare make angry. Though she possessed a heart of gold, she had her own way about everything and could get quite testy if anything deviated from the norm. "Last I heard your sister wasn't ready to rent that room."

"She wasn't, isn't." Alicia tried not to squirm. She knew she shouldn't feel intimidated. After all, she was the employer, by current appointment at least, and this was an employee. Still, Wilma had the ability to make her want to draw into her shell like a terrified turtle. "The room is ready. Star simply hasn't had time to decide on how much she will charge. This is a new guest to Addison House and one we hope will return." *Again and again and again.* "I thought it would

be a good way to make his first stay here as pleasant as possible and use him as a Guinea Pig for the newly built room as well.” Okay, so it was a lie but it sounded like a good one with purpose.

“What are you charging him?” Wilma pulled a pan of homemade biscuits from the oven.

Normally an employee would be out of line by asking such a question but Wilma wasn't just any employee. She knew everything that transpired under the roof of Addison House. She was cook, busybody, mother and confidant. Nothing happened, nothing was done that she didn't eventually find out about.

“I'm not charging him a penny more than he agreed to upon reservation.”

“Your sister is going to be furious.” Wilma shot her a warning look over one slumped shoulder.

“I'll deal with Star.”

“And the other guests? What are you going to tell them when they find out you gave this man such a lavish upgrade at such an inexpensive rate?”

“Mr. Smith and I are the only ones who know what he is paying for the room or that he is staying in a different room than he reserved.”

“I know.” Wilma stabbed a finger at her apron-covered chest.

“And yes, you know. But I don't see you running to the other guests flapping your jaws.”

“I might.” The cook said it with a straight face but Alicia didn't miss the twinkle of amusement in her eyes.

“No you won't.” Alicia moved to plant a quick kiss on Wilma's cheek. “Mr. Smith has requested a ten o'clock delivery. Ring me in Star's office when it's ready and I'll take it to him.”

* * * *

Alicia settled behind Star's desk and powered up the computer. It

was then that she spotted the note, the edge of it tucked under the mouse pad. She read it quickly and silently apologized to Mr. Smith for ever thinking he was an inconsiderate pain in the ass. Though she already ate those words profusely the minute she opened the door to Derek last night. Apparently he *had* called Star to tell her he would be arriving late. Alicia simply hadn't seen the note her sister left for her.

"Ms. Alicia." Debby poked her head through the open doorway of the office. "Do you have a minute?"

"Of course, Debby. Are you feeling okay? Do you need to go home?"

"No, no. It's nothing like that." She walked into the office, perched on the edge of the chair in front of the desk, and folded her hands in her lap. "I—Well, I wanted to speak with you for a minute. It's about the guest on the third floor. I believe Wilma called him Mr. Smith."

"Yes, that's correct. Is there some problem?"

"Mrs. Addison, Mrs. Star," the maid corrected since they were both Addisons and Star preferred her maiden name to Harrington. "We talked a little about the new room but didn't finalize anything. The room is much larger than the others and will take up a great deal more of my time. There were also some special things she expects in there though I'm not sure exactly what they are as of yet."

"And I assume your rate of pay will be changing with the addition of the work load."

"Yes ma'am, but Mrs. Star and I haven't talked about that yet either. I'm not trying to cause problems Ms. Alicia..."

"No Debby." Alicia held up a hand interrupting the woman. "Of course you're not. Here's what I suggest. You continue with your work as always, forget there is a guest in that room. I will take care of that room and Mr. K—" She had to catch herself before she said Mr. Kadin. "Mr. Smith's needs until he leaves or my sister returns and the two of you come to an agreement."

The intercom of the house phone sounded and Wilma announced

the tray for Mr. Smith was ready for delivery. As Alicia stood and followed Debby out of the office, she took a deep breath to prepare herself for another meeting with the man of her dreams, knowing all the while the best she could hope for was to retain some level of sanity while she was under the spell simply looking at him put over her.

* * * *

Insomnia was a demon from hell and Derek suffered from it relentlessly. Even so, sleep should have come easy after the seventeen-hour drive from Philadelphia to St. Petersburg. He'd been wiped out by the time he reached Addison House last night, certain he would indulge in his best sleep in years once he settled in his room. Then he'd met his beautiful hostess and all hopes of a good night's rest vanished in fantasies staring the five-foot-six brunette with a pair of exquisite legs that seemingly begged to be wrapped around his waist and a pair of shapely breast that demanded their own attention. In the light of the new day, he decided to consider himself lucky to have slept even three hours last night.

His luck continued its rollercoaster ride when the band's publicist found him on his cell phone. He mulled over not answering. Hundreds of miles away and he still couldn't escape. But vacation or not he had a responsibility to the band, to his fans. Promotion had to go on to keep the band fresh in the minds of their listeners while he and his band mates were out of the action working on the new CD. So he answered the phone.

Taking it with him, he stepped naked into the whirlpool, only half-hearted listening to the publicist drone on as he submerged himself in the hot swirling water. The relief was instantaneous, the tension in his muscles subsiding and leaving him feeling revived and more relaxed than he'd felt in months.

"I'm not exactly sure when I will be back." He stretched an arm

along the back of the whirlpool, let his eyes drift shut only to open them again a heartbeat later at the soft rap on the door. He shot a glance at the green digital numbers on the VCR clock. Ten AM. Breakfast.

“Hang on a sec,” he said into the phone just as he heard another slightly louder knock at the door. This time the knock was followed by the barely audible words “room service”. He started to tell the servant to leave the tray outside the door but the voice registered in his mind before he could speak.

“Just a minute,” he called, stood, reached for a towel.

* * * *

Alicia clenched the breakfast tray and took one last deep calming breath before the door opened. The breath caught in her throat. Sweet Jesus! She had died and gone to heaven. The man opened the door wearing nothing but a towel, a cell phone and a smile. She nearly dropped the tray. The corners of his mouth twitched and she felt the sudden urge to strangle him. Obviously her attempts at being discrete failed. He knew the effect he had on her and he enjoyed the hell out of turning her to a puddle of mush.

He stepped aside just enough to allow her room to enter. Her elbow brushed his rock-hard abs as she moved through the doorway. The slight contact had electricity sizzling through her very soul.

“I have to go,” he said to his caller as he took the tray from her hands and placed it on the coffee table.

Alicia tried not to stare but she couldn't take her eyes off of him. She had seen him without a shirt before in pictures but the cameras failed to capture the true essence of his beauty. Drops of water glistened on his broad shoulders, in the dark curly hairs that spanned his muscular chest. She could almost taste the water as she longed to lick it from his skin, to follow the trail of dark curls leading down his flat stomach and disappeared beneath the line of the towel wrapped

around his waist. He was tan and she couldn't help but wonder if the tan was complete under that towel.

Under that towel...Cripes! If he moved just right that towel would come undone and put an end to her wondering. As it was, her imagination threatened to take her on one hell of a ride. The way the towel stretched across his mouth-watering ass when he bent slightly to put down the tray, the way it failed to conceal the bulge of his cock in the front, made her mind reel with possibilities.

He snapped the cell phone shut and greeted her with a smile that made her whole world tilt. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she said, surprised at how steady her voice sounded when everything inside her was shaking with desire. "I didn't mean to interrupt your...soak. I could have left the tray outside the door."

"But then I wouldn't have gotten to see you." He stepped closer, the smile fading as his eyes slowly crawled down her body and back up again. "I think the soak can wait, unless you would like to join me."

Oh God, oh God, oh God. "Mr. Smith..."

"Derek, remember? I think after the kiss we shared last night you can definitely call me by my first name."

"Derek." She nodded, breathed deep. "I don't think that's such a good idea." She stepped away, moved across the room, putting much needed distance between them. She knew what he could do to her, knew that with a mere touch he could take her to the teetering edge of insanity. Losing her mind right now was something she couldn't afford to do.

A book on the table by the sofa caught her eye and she moved toward it. It was her book, the first in the Blood Diaries series. He had no way of knowing she was the author, of course. Her picture wasn't in the book and all her work was published under her pen name, Mallory Zamir.

She picked up the book, turned to find him once again standing in

arms reach. "You read vampire novels?" She knew he did. Anne Rice was one of his favorites. And what did he think of Mallory's work? She couldn't help but wonder. Especially after she'd made the suggestion he try the Blood Diary series herself. Anonymously, of course, in a post to him on the band's Internet board. She never used either of her names there, not Mallory and certainly not Alicia. She was known simply by her screen name, Derek's Princess.

"I do. This one came highly recommended by...a friend. Alicia, I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I apologize."

Something snapped. Alicia couldn't explain it but she saw red. She tossed the book down on the table with a thud and moved in to him. "Stop apologizing to me," she said through gritted teeth. "Apparently you find me attractive and believe me," she allowed her gaze to trail slowly down his body, drink him in as it slid back up to meet his eyes, "the feeling is mutual."

"But?" His tone rang with amusement.

"But...I don't know you and I don't have sex with men I don't know." It was a lie, at least the first part was a lie, but it was a typical one.

He extended his hand, a mischievous grin spreading across his lips. "Hi, I'm Derek."

Alicia laughed. She couldn't help it. His attempt at comedy came so unexpectedly. "Nice one."

"Can't blame a man for trying." He shrugged and pulled her into his arms, all playfulness swept away. "Have dinner with me tonight." He made it sound as more of an order than a request.

"I can't Derek. I have to be downstairs with the other guests."

"Then come up here after everyone goes to their rooms. We'll have a drink or two and talk. You can get to know me."

Alicia closed her eyes. He was offering her what she wanted most, a chance to get to know the man outside of Façade. She knew anything she learned about him at this stage would be a part of the carefully guarded Derek Kadin, the part he shielded from his fans, the

media, most of the world. No way could she pass it up.

She nodded wordlessly in agreement and, though she wasn't a fan of Rod Stewart, the lyrics of *Tonight's the Night* began playing in her head.

* * * *

"I apologize, Mrs. Poindexter. I should have called to cancel my appointment." Who's being inconsiderate now? Alicia mused as she paced the office floor. She adjusted the cell phone at her ear, centering the tiny speaker over her ear canal. "My plans changed unexpectedly and my fiancé," she cringed, glad the realtor couldn't see through the cellular waves, "was unaware."

"When would you like to reschedule?" The faceless, pushy realtor's tone was clipped, no-nonsense.

"I'll have to get back with you. At this point, I don't know when I will have a break in my schedule."

The woman babbled a moment longer, pushed for a confirmed date and time, then finally none too happily accepted Alicia's offer to call when she found a free moment.

"Thank you, Mrs. Poindexter," Alicia said interminably polite. She bid the woman a quick goodbye, punched the end button of the cell phone.

"Mrs. Poindexter? Isn't that the realtor William contacted for you?"

Alicia whirled around to find her mother standing in the doorway of the office. Suddenly that soak in the whirlpool Derek offered didn't sound like a bad idea after all, not that it ever really had. "Mother, I wasn't expecting you. How are you?" She walked to her mother, gave her a gentle hug.

"I had some time before I'm to meet the ladies at the club for a late lunch." Margaret Addison moved further into the office, shutting the door behind her. "William called me this morning. He's wondering

why you didn't keep your appointment with the realtor. Since I wasn't sure myself, I thought I would stop by."

Alicia watched her mother walk an observant circle around the office. Whoever made the parental choices in the heavens above miscalculated when they paired the two of them. She and her mother were like sweet tarts and poached salmon, two items you definitely wouldn't serve together.

Margaret Addison was a short five-foot-three-inches with salon bleached blond hair to her shoulders, a heavily made-up face meant to accent her narrow hazel eyes and a figure not bad for a woman who just hit fifty but kept that way only by strict dieting and hours at the spa and gym. She was glamorous in every sense of the word. So prim and proper it seemed every minute of her life was like an audition for the title of First Lady.

"Star needed me here." Alicia moved to the bar and fixed herself a brandy. After all these years, it seemed she was suddenly developing a taste for the dark liquors. Or maybe it was simply the need for a stiff drink to wash away her troubles.

"Isn't it a bit early to start drinking?" her mother asked with a disapproving scowl that could be heard even if Alicia didn't see it.

It's never too early to drink when I have to deal with you, Alicia thought crossly. "It's nearly one o'clock, mother. If William had asked me before taking the liberty of making the appointment with Mrs. Poindexter he would've known I wouldn't be able to meet with the woman."

"In his defense, he wouldn't have," her mother argued. "It's my understanding he made the arrangements before Star decided to make her jaunt to Morocco with Peter."

"He couldn't have. There wasn't time." Unless he made the appointment before he even asked her to marry him.

And that's exactly what he did, Alicia realized in the next heartbeat, her blood boiling. The bastard was so confident he had her wrapped around his finger that he probably had the rest of her life

planned for her.

"I don't know when he made the appointment, Alicia, and frankly it's not important. It isn't like your schedule is so full you can't take a few hours to look at some houses."

You have no idea what my schedule is like, Alicia started to say but bit her tongue. Her writing career was nothing more than a passing hobby to her mother and, no matter how well known she became, she doubted her mother's opinion would ever change.

"That's not the point mother," she said, finding it increasingly difficult to keep a tight lid on her temper. "He should have consulted me before making a promise I may or may not have been able to keep."

"You're being incorrigible, Alicia. You are to be William's wife and he does and will expect you to act as such. If he makes an engagement for you, you should reorganize your schedule to accommodate."

When hell freezes over!

"I didn't hear you make another appointment." Margaret raised one perfectly plucked brow. "When are you planning to meet with Mrs. Poindexter?"

"I have no idea." Alicia sighed, sipped the brandy, and raised her free hand to massage her forehead. She could feel a massive headache beginning behind her eyes.

"Where is your ring?" Margaret sounded horrified. "Why are you not wearing it?"

Oops! She couldn't give her mother the same excuse she gave Gloria Badcock. Margaret knew the ring was perfectly sized. "I must have forgotten to put it back on after my shower this morning."

"You shouldn't have taken it off in the first place. A married woman never walks around without her wedding ring."

"I'm not married," Alicia reminded her mother through clenched teeth.

"You will be soon enough. And why haven't you returned my call

so we can begin planning this wedding? Didn't you get the message I left on your machine?"

"I haven't had time." Alicia sank into the chair behind the desk and wished with all her might that it would swallow her whole.

"Well, you need to make time," her mother ordered firmly. "You have no idea how much work goes in to planning such an event. If you expect me to help you we have to get started immediately."

"There isn't going to be a wedding," Alicia said and was as shocked as her mother when the words came out of her mouth.

* * * *

Derek couldn't remember the last time he spent an entire day in a single set of rooms not leaving for even the minutest reason. It had been nice, he mused, but tomorrow he would have to get out for a while. Maybe he would hit a few balls on the tennis court visible from his private balcony, perhaps take a tour around the grounds of Addison House.

He glanced at the clock on the bedside table as he walked in from the balcony and noted it was nearing midnight. Unless she changed her mind, Alicia would be joining him soon. He hoped she didn't change her mind. There was something about her. He couldn't put his finger on it exactly but whatever it was made him want her more than he wanted anyone in a long time. The throbbing in his cock that began at the mere thought of her was proof of that.

In a word, Alicia Addison was classy. Day or night she looked as though she stepped out of a movie screen. Her expensive business suits accented her womanly curves instead of diminishing them like such suits often did. She was fair skinned and didn't wear a lot of make-up. Though she wore some sort of foundation, it matched her complexion and was light enough that the few freckles that speckled her cheeks and crossed over the bridge of her nose shown through, breaking the businesswoman persona with a touch of the girl that

remained within. Her hair had been styled in a French twist last night and this morning it had been much the same way, pulled up and pinned back without a single strand out of place.

He wondered how she would look dressed down, in a T-shirt and jeans or shorts perhaps. Then his mind stripped her of those clothes too and he attempted to picture those delectable curves naked. His fingers longed to release her silky dark hair from its accustomed confines. Her hair would need to be down if she were naked, he decided. He wanted to mess up her hair, allow it to fall naturally around her face and down her back, feel it fall around his own face as she leaned over him. He could picture her on top of him, his cock buried inside her sweet heat, her hair falling around her to cover her bare breasts.

Would she ride him like that? He adjusted his growing cock in the black shorts he wore at the idea. She struck him as a very controlled woman but did she tend to lose that control in bed? Oh man, he wanted to find out! Maybe that was why he found himself so taken by her, he thought as he walked to the stereo in the sitting room. She was so different from most of the women he met.

He exchanged the discs in the changer for Metallica, Type O Negative and Black Sabbath. Maybe he should put in something softer, something more to Alicia's liking, but he wasn't sure what kind of music she preferred. The Tool CD that had been playing when she delivered his breakfast that morning hadn't seemed to bother her. Though he got the impression from the way she seemed unable to take her eyes off of him that he could've had children's nursery rhyme songs playing and she wouldn't have noticed.

Maybe he shouldn't have answered the door wearing only a towel, he thought and laughed, deciding to leave his choice of CDs in the stereo.

Derek had grown accustomed to women looking at him, to seeing the desire in their eyes. It felt weird to know there were so many who found him appealing, even stranger to know many fantasized about

him. Sure, it was flattering to say the least but weird nevertheless.

He saw that look in Alicia's eyes the instant she opened the door upon his arrival and nearly every time she looked at him since. Still, it wasn't the same. She hadn't gasped, screamed, melted at his feet, or cried—all reactions he got from female fans over the years.

"The difference is she's not a fan," he said aloud, running a hand over his shaved head. She didn't know he was the vocalist of a well-known heavy metal band. Hell, she didn't even know his real last name! To her, he was simply a man she found good-looking.

And that was it, he decided as he poured himself a glass of Crown at the bar. She wasn't blinded by his fame or money. Shit, if her sister's obvious wealth reflected on Alicia, she probably had more money than he did.

Alicia was attracted to him because she liked the way he looked. Plain and simple. She wanted to get to know him because he was a man she found herself drawn to, not because of his profession. It felt great, but even so, he felt a twinge of guilt at his deception. He should tell her who he is, he knew, and he would eventually but he couldn't yet find it in himself to destroy his own fantasy.

For so long, he yearned to meet a woman who was unaware of his fame, who was attracted to him for the man he is and nothing more. If he told Alicia the truth he was certain it would change everything. His anonymity would be shattered. He came to Addison House to escape and knew the only way to accomplish that was to do so under the veil of secrecy. But he hadn't expected to meet a woman he couldn't stop himself from wanting.

He had no expectations of where things would lead between him and Alicia. He knew that eventually, maybe not tonight but sooner or later, they would end up in bed. The chemistry between them was too great for any other outcome. But after that, after he returned to Philadelphia, to his life, only fate knew what would happen.

* * * *

Alicia said a mental apology to Debby for not putting the gathering room to rights as she shut off the light and headed for the stairs. It was the maid's responsibility to clean the room anyway, though since she had usually gone home by the time the guests were through with their cocktails, Star, or in tonight's case, Alicia, would generally straighten any mess.

Tonight's disarray consisted of few glasses and a tray of half-eaten snacks left to clutter the tabletop. It wouldn't take more than thirty seconds to pick up the items and return them to the kitchen. But after the day Alicia had, thirty seconds was twenty-nine more than she could bear to put off her escape to Derek's room.

As she made her way up first one flight of stairs and then the other, she prayed he hadn't given up on her, decided she wasn't coming and gone to bed. When she reached the closed door to his room, she heard the faint sound of Metallica playing inside and knew he waited up for her.

He opened the door wearing not much more than he had at ten o'clock that morning. The cell phone was gone, the glistening water drops replaced with a solid black muscle shirt that showed every ripple in his chest and arms to perfection. He wore tight black shorts that bulged in the front a bit more than usual. He had a hard-on, or the beginnings of one at least, she realized. Had he been thinking about her? God, she hoped so.

"You've been on my mind," he said and her head snapped up. He was grinning at her. Not a wide ear-to-ear grin but just enough tilt to those delectable lips to tell her he knew exactly what she'd been thinking. Christ! She never read anything that reported Derek Kadin as a psychic.

She felt the heat from his admission rush to all parts of her body. Was the man trying to kill her? She could see the headlines now: Woman Dies of Hormone Overload. "You enjoy doing that, don't you?" She pushed past him to enter the room.

“What's that?” He shut the door, walked to her and slid his arms around her waist.

Alicia stepped out of her heels as he pulled her against him. Her arms found their way around his neck, the palm of one hand resting on his nape. The feel of his body pressed to hers was excruciatingly torturous and yet it was a torment she wished she could experience for the rest of her life. But she couldn't, knew she wouldn't. Forever with this man was not an option and she would never kid herself into believing it possible.

“Making me blush.” She purposely added a seductive undertone to her voice. “You get a kick out of it. You enjoy saying things that you know will make me turn red.”

“Actually, I do.” His lips brushed hers in a soft caress. “Something tells me that isn't the only thing I would enjoy doing to you.” His hand slid up her back, moved down again. “You're awfully tense tonight. Rough day?”

“You have no idea.”

“Do you want a drink?”

“Desperately, I only had one glass of wine with the other guests though I was tempted to polish off what was left of that bottle of Crown you opened last night.”

“Why don't you start with a glass and you can work your way up to a half a bottle.” He smiled, kissed the tip of her nose before releasing her to walk to the bar in the other room.

Alicia followed but stopped at the entry to the room and leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. “I thought you might join us for cocktails downstairs,” she said as she watched him. His movements were graceful, natural as he poured the Crown over a glass of ice. Did he move like that in bed, she wondered, so easy, so fluidly?

“I thought about it,” he admitted as he returned to her. “But I wanted you all to myself.” He flashed her that movie star grin and handed her the glass.

She took it and gulped down half the brown liquid, ignoring the

burning protest of her throat at each swallow. “I think I'm actually beginning to like the taste of this stuff.”

Derek laughed. “It's the best. I would watch how quickly I drank it though. It has a tendency to sneak up on you if you're not used to it, and the after effects can be pretty brutal.”

Alicia thought of Reese and the comments he often made about carrying lots of Pedialyte on tour. It was a trick many musicians learned to promote rehydration and ward off hangovers after a night of heavy alcohol.

“Do you want to get out of those clothes? Relax?” Derek's gaze made a quick sweep down the satin white blouse and maroon skirt she wore.

Alicia lifted a brow and bit the inside of her cheek to hold back a grin. “And how do you suggest I do that?”

“I could think of several ways, sweetheart, but, in truth, I was only offering a shirt and pair of shorts. Something more comfortable.”

“Your clothes would swallow me.”

“Lucky clothes,” he muttered and walked to the dresser.

Alicia's stomach flip-flopped, sure he would do a better job at it.

He returned in seconds, this time carrying a black sleeveless shirt and a pair of dark gray shorts. “These have a drawstring at the waist. It should keep them from falling off of you.”

“Thank you.” She moved to the bathroom but stopped in the doorway and turned to him. “I should tell you before I put on a pair of your shorts, I'm not wearing any underwear.”

He nodded wordlessly but she didn't miss the heat, the want that flooded his eyes. She smiled to herself as she entered the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Now that was how a man was supposed to react to such a discovery.

Alicia quickly changed into the clothes Derek gave her. The shirt was about two sizes too big and hit her at mid-thigh. The shorts, even with the drawstring tied as tight as the string would allow, rested on her hips. They were comfortable. They felt good against her skin and

much like clothes she would choose to wear when not playing the role of the prim and proper Alicia Addison.

She caught her reflection in the large rectangular mirror hanging behind the sink. She knew the shirt. Derek wore it in countless posters and interviews and, if she wasn't mistaken, it was the same shirt he'd been wearing the first time they met. On him, it fit like a glove, snugly and oh so deliciously. On her, it was too long, too large and she looked like a rag doll. She loved it! It was just what she needed after such a horrific day, to feel like herself, the real Alicia, again.

Don't get too comfortable. If you let him see the real you completely you'll blow everything.

Derek sat in the corner of the Pollock sofa, a drink in one hand, his other arm stretched over the back of the cushions, when she stepped into the sitting room. But it was the music that stopped her in her tracks. Metallica had faded into Type O Negative and the soft melodic piano of *Love You to Death* drifted through the room. Alicia, the real Alicia, loved the song. It was one of her favorites. The smooth flowing melody, the deep dark voice of Peter Steele, the lyrics seeped into her soul and caressed the romantic inside her.

The song was a favorite of Derek's as well. Ironically, they discussed it in one of her first posts to him on the band's post board. From that moment on, she fantasized of sharing it with him, of staring into his eyes as the melody flowed over them.

"Is something wrong?" Derek words splintered through her thoughts.

She shook her head, looked at him. At that moment, she wanted to tell him everything. She wanted to clue him in on her thoughts, her knowledge, and her true desires. Yet fear of ruining everything she was so close to gaining kept the words bottled inside her.

"That song," she said as she walked to him. "The piano, the melody, it's beautiful."

"Type O Negative, It's one of their best. You look..." He hesitated as his gaze slid over her.

“Like Raggedy Ann's older sister,” she finished for him.

He laughed at that. “I was going to say comfortable, more at ease, oddly more like you belong.”

Uh oh. If dressing down changed her appearance that much, she would have to be more careful than she thought.

“Sit down.” He patted the cushion beside him. “But turn your back to me.”

She did as he requested, folding her right leg under her as she sat sideways on the sofa, her left foot staying on the floor.

His large, strong hands folded over her shoulders, the thumbs and fingertips kneading the tight muscles they found there. Her head fell forward as a moan escaped her lips. His hands felt so good, so strong, so right on her, and she wondered how they would feel on her bare flesh.

“Does that feel good?”

“Oh yes.” She sighed from the pleasure, from the heat that radiated from his hands. “Please, don't stop.”

He chuckled softly, leaning forward to whisper in her ear. The feel of his breath on her skin brought goose pimples to the surface of her arms and legs. “This isn't exactly what I had planned to be doing the first time I heard you say that to me but I guess it will have to do.”

“Derek,” she breathed, her head still bowed. “You're doing it again.”

“What's that sweetheart?” He moved back, his hands gliding across her neck, down her spine, under her shoulder blades, expertly working the kinks out of each muscle he found.

“Making me blush.”

“I would've put on some different music but I didn't know what you preferred,” he said conversationally.

Alicia's heart tripped a beat. Your music is what she wanted to say but instead, she said, “I don't listen to music much but when I do I like a variety. Anything with a good beat.” And that was the biggest lie she told him yet. God forgive her. “What kind of music is this?”

Category, I mean. Metal?" she asked, feigning stupidity.

"Heavy metal, yes." She felt his body shake slightly from the nod. "It's mostly what I listen to, though I do listen to other types on occasion."

And sing it too. Say it, Alicia silently pleaded. Tell me you're really Derek Kadin, vocalist of Façade. "You have a great voice." She turned her head to look at him over one shoulder. "Has anyone ever told you that?" She saw the truth flash through his eyes though she would have missed it if she hadn't already known the truth.

"No," he said but his gaze didn't meet her eyes. "You're the first."

So, she wasn't the only one telling a mountain of lies. "Well, you do. I love to listen to you talk. Your voice is soothing, soft. And the way you speak, so articulate, it's beautiful."

"Thank you."

Alicia sighed inwardly. He wasn't going to say it. He wasn't going to tell her the truth. If he was the one to break his anonymity she could safely tell him everything. Instead, he fell silent.

"Hey, I tell you what an amazing voice you have and you stop talking to me," she said, trying to break the wall that seemed to have built between them. "That was certainly not my intention. See if I give you another compliment."

"I finished that book today," he said and, just like that, they were back. Two people physically attracted to one another and fused together emotionally by lies.

Book? It took her a moment to understand he was talking about *her* book. "Really? What did you think of it?"

"It was good, a bit too much romance for my reading taste." He shuffled behind her and slipped one leg between her and the sofa, pulled her closer in the V he created with his legs. "The author has a good voice, a good writing style." His hands returned to finish her massage. "If you like vampire novels, I would recommend giving it a try."

She smiled, reveling in the fact that he enjoyed her work. This

was one thing about which she could be truthful. She kept Mallory Zamir completely separate from Alicia Addison. There was no indication of Alicia's musical knowledge, her likes or dislikes in Mallory. So even if he tried to find out more about Mallory he wouldn't discover more than she wanted him to.

"Derek." She twisted her upper body to look at him. "I have a confession." The shock, the anger, the fear that swept over his expression made the blood freeze in her veins. He thought he had been made, thought she was about to tell him so. "I wrote that book. I'm Mallory Zamir."

The anger and fear instantly disappeared but the shock remained. "You're Mallory Zamir? No kidding?" He leaned to one side to get a better look at her. "Why didn't you tell me that this morning?"

"Please don't be mad. When I saw the book, learned you were reading it, I wanted to know what you truly thought of it. I didn't want you to say you liked it just because I wrote it, to keep from hurting my feelings. Please tell me you aren't mad," she said again, too afraid to be ashamed by the pleading tone of her voice.

"I'm not mad." He chuckled. "Surprised, amazed maybe, but not mad. Now I know I have to read the rest of the series."

Alicia let out a burst of air she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "How about an autographed copy of the next book?"

"I would like that."

"I'm so glad you're not angry with me."

His hand came up, the palm caressing her cheek. Her head tilted slightly, moving into his touch. "Sweetheart, I don't think there is anything you could do to make me angry.

Oh God. She closed her eyes as a lump formed in her throat. *Yes there is.*

His hand slid from her cheek to the nape of her neck as he pulled her face closer and captured her lips with his. This time it was more than a feather-like caress. It was a complete, all out, rock her world, fireworks exploding kiss. Her lips parted and he took it for the

invitation it was meant to be. Slowly, his tongue entered her mouth and found hers. He tasted warm, sweet with the faint remnants of Crown.

Instinctively, one arm encircled his neck, the other resting on his upper thigh as she melted to the kiss. She felt him reach behind her, release her hair from the long plastic pins that bound it. He ran his fingers through the long strands as it fell around her shoulders. Her eyes fluttered open as he broke the kiss and leaned back slightly to look at her.

“I’ve dreamt of taking your hair down this way.” His voice was husky and full of desire. “You’re beautiful.”

Alicia couldn’t speak. She felt as if she were in a dream of vivid color and detail and, in a way, she was. She was living a dream she’d had for over two years, in the arms of the man she yearned for equally as long. But the feelings, the emotions were stronger than any in her dreams.

He kissed her again, harder, more passionate and her body reacted to the velocity of it, shivering to her very core. Her nipples tightened almost to the point of pain. She felt the stiffness of his erection against her hip still lodged between his legs and her pussy throbbed in demand. Her feminine juices built inside her until they threatened to overflow. She hadn’t thought it possible for a man to bring a woman so close to orgasm with a simple kiss. Then again, she had never been kissed quite like this. The fact that it was Derek Kadin controlling the kiss only heightened the astronomical effect. Skillfully, without breaking the hold he had on her mouth, he turned her until she faced him completely. Her legs wrapped around his waist as she sat almost in his lap.

“I want you Alicia,” he whispered against her lips. “For God’s sake, let me have you.”

Emotions tore through her, nearly ripping her apart. She wanted him more than she ever wanted anything in her life. She wanted to submit to him, give him everything he wanted, everything he needed

and more.

The more was the part that terrified her.

“Derek, I can't. We can't. Not yet,” she heard herself say and there was a pain that flowed with her words that she hadn't expected.

The muscle in his jaw jumped as he stared at her. He opened his mouth to speak but shut it quickly without uttering a word. He closed his eyes for a few long agonizing seconds then opened them and continued to stare at her.

Alicia gazed back at him not exactly knowing what to expect. She looked as deep as she possibly could, trying to read his thoughts, and what she saw surprised her. It wasn't anger buried in his chocolate brown eyes or even annoyance. She saw understanding, a struggle for control. “Derek, I...” She began but he held a finger over her lips to silence her.

“Shh, I understand,” he said in a cracked whisper. “We just met. We know little about one another but that doesn't change how I feel. I don't like games or pretenses, Alicia, so I'm being straight with you. I want you, more than I've wanted any woman in a long time. And you want me.” His finger slid from her lips as his thumb trailed down her chin and over to one breast. His thumb skimmed like a whisper over her hardened nipple. Even through the material of the shirt, the slight touch was a tiny illustration of the pleasure he was promising her. “You can't deny that anymore than you can ignore the chemistry between us.”

“No, I can't,” she admitted breathlessly, fighting conflicting urges to run, to cry, to rip off his clothes and give both of them what they so desperately wanted right there on the sofa.

“I want to have sex with you. I want to make love to you, Alicia.” He cupped her breast in his hand as he spoke, kneading, fondling, as he pulled her even closer to him.

She swallowed, battling with the tears that threatened to spill, with the control that threatened to flee. He had no idea how much his words meant to her. To hear him, Derek Kadin, say those words to

her. The things he said weren't merely lines to get her into bed. Somehow she knew that. He lied to her yes, but only to protect his identity. Everything else he told her, everything she saw in his eyes, felt in his touch was the truth. Somehow she knew that and believed it.

"I don't want it until you're ready and yet I can't keep my hands off of you." The hand on her breast squeezed a soft moan from her lips. "I want to touch more of you. I want to taste you. If I can't yet have you at least let me do that much."

It wasn't until she felt his hand close over her pussy through the shorts that she understood what he asked. "But that isn't fair," she said in a weak protest. "It won't be fair to you."

"I don't give a damn about fairness." His hands moved to her waist as he slowly lowered her to lie on the sofa. With her legs still on either side of him, he settled himself between them. He rested his weight on one arm as he hovered over her. Gently, he brushed her hair from her face with his other hand as he slowly lowered his mouth to her, effectively cutting off any further protest she might have had.

Chapter Four

The kiss was savage, stunning. He teased her lips with his tongue, licking, tasting just as he'd said he wanted to do. He caught her bottom lip between his teeth and nibbled gently before pushing his tongue into her mouth. His hips rocked between hers, his dick grinding against her pussy. He would have been inside her then if not for the barrier of their clothing.

Alicia moaned and the soft sound seemed to put a crack in the wall of his self-control. His tongue went wild inside her mouth dancing with hers so fast she could hardly keep up. Then she felt his hand creep under the shirt, pulling it up until her breasts were freed between them and she forgot all about concentrating on his mouth. He broke the kiss long enough to pull the shirt over her head and toss it to the floor.

She didn't fight him. She couldn't. The spell of having the weight of his body on top of her, the feel of his dick hard between her legs was too great. Ready or not, he could have his way with her right now and she would be powerless to stop him.

Derek kissed her neck, licked his way to her collarbone where he stopped for a quick nibble before continuing down leaving sparks of fire everywhere his mouth touched. He drew her right breast into his mouth and instinctively, her back arched, pushing her tit further into the warmth of him. He sucked in a breath and she knew what he did drove him as equally crazy as it was her.

"Oh God," she whispered as his teeth closed around her nipple. His bite was light and gentle, yet just hard enough to send a lightning bolt of pleasurable pain straight to her pussy. The throbbing between

her legs became so intense she squirmed beneath him. “Derek, I... You're... I can't...” She stammered as she felt herself climbing higher toward orgasm.

With one last suck, he released her breast and raised his upper body to rest on one arm. He gazed down at her and the want, the desire she saw in his eyes took her breath away. “Hold it in, sweetheart,” he said softly as his free hand eased down her stomach, under the waistband of the shorts to the soft narrow patch of her pubic hair. His gaze stayed locked on hers as he slid one finger between her pussy lips and slowly over her swollen clit. “I'm not through with you yet.” He pushed one finger into her sodden channel.

Her eyes closed, her head pushed back against the sofa cushion as her hips lifted to meet his finger. He pulled out of her, paused until she opened her eyes to look at him, and then drove two fingers side by side into her aching heat as deep as they would go. She gasped and dug her fingernails into the back of the sofa, her other hand grasping the front of his shirt in a fist.

“You can't cum until my mouth is on you so I can taste you, drink you like I said I wanted.”

Through the haze of sexual bliss, Alicia nodded though she barely heard him over the pounding of her heart. With each push of his fingers inside her, her breath caught, her inner muscles clenched, and when his thumb brushed her clitoris her legs shook around him. She was close, so excruciatingly close. A couple more thrusts of those wide, long fingers, a few more caresses from that slightly callused thumb on her clit and she would explode.

As if sensing how close to orgasm she was, he pulled his hand out of the shorts. Alicia nearly screamed in protest. She watched as he pushed himself up and sat back. He lifted the fingers he'd had inside her to his mouth and licked them clean of her juices. He looked so unbelievably sexy sitting between her legs, his eyes darkened by sexual desire, a small knowing grin on his moist lips.

“Scoot back.” The erotic tone to the voice she so loved to hear

was as tantalizing to her body as his touch. "As far back as you can."

She followed his instructions though her entire body shook from the movement. When she settled, her upper body resting against the arm of the sofa, he shuffled into a more comfortable position between her legs. In one fluid motion, he untied the drawstring of the shorts and began pulling them off of her. She lifted her hips then drew in her legs to slide them out of the shorts.

His gaze never left her as he tossed the shorts aside. She lay naked, her legs splayed on either side of him, completely on display. It was then that she wished for a sudden power outage. What was he thinking as his gaze slid over her? Did he like what he saw or was he disappointed? She knew her body couldn't compare to most this man had seen naked and it made her uncomfortable.

"You're so beautiful." He moved over her, stopping only inches from her face. "Your body is incredible," he whispered against her lips. Then he was kissing her again.

How did he do that? How did he seem to know what she was thinking?

Between her legs, his fingers returned to her pussy, plunging inside her without warning. "Oh God," she said into his mouth and felt him smile around her lips. His fingers wiggled and curved inside her and almost instantly she was hanging on to her orgasm by a mere ounce of willpower. One touch to her clit and there would be no stopping her this time. It amazed her at how intuitive he was to her body's reaction. He brought her only a breath away from climax and withdrew from her again.

This time she did protest. "Derek!" She whimpered. The time for being embarrassed at how pleading and needy she sounded had long passed.

"Yes, sweetheart." He moved away from her.

"You're driving me crazy." She ground the words through clenched teeth.

"Do you want to cum, Alicia?" He traced the outside of her pussy

lips with the tips of his fingers.

She squirmed, writhed, one hand still clasped on the back of the sofa, the other with a death grip on the armrest behind her head. "Yes!" The word burst from her on a gush of air. "Please."

He smiled, nodded as he pushed both hands flat under her buttocks, lifting her as his head lowered between her legs. But still, he wasn't through tormenting her. He licked the inside of her thigh, down to the outer edge of her lips.

"Derek, please!" She pleaded, wiggled beneath him.

"Please what Alicia?" His hot breath against her sex was a new kind of torture.

"Lick me, eat me, make me cum!" The shock of the perverse words that came out of her mouth only had a second to register before his tongue delved between her wet folds. His hands moved beneath her, spreading her open as he licked his way down her clitoris to her eagerly awaiting vagina.

When his tongue entered her, she went mindless. Her eyes closed and everything around her disappeared. All she could think of was the excruciating pleasure shooting through her body as he fucked her with his tongue. She ran a hand over his shaved head, barely registering the satiny feel as she pushed his face into her. Her hips moved with him, settling into the moderate tempo he set. When he brought one hand around, pressed a thumb to her clit and caressed with pressured strokes, she could hold back no longer. She exploded, jerking, groaning, completely breathless. He continued to lick her, slurping up her cum as it spewed out of her.

* * * *

"Are you sure we shouldn't be having lunch at the donut shop?" Diana asked without greeting as she draped the large bag she used as a purse over the back of her chair and sat down. "You sounded chocolate emergency desperate on the phone."

Alicia laughed but the sound held no humor. “A chocolate donut the size of Manhattan couldn't help me right now.” She stared out over the water, watching as the waves crashed against the distant shore. It was like her heart, she decided, smashing against the wall of her chest and disappearing in shatters. At least, that's what would happen if she continued on her present course.

A young blond waitress appeared at the table. Alicia and Diana placed identical orders for a Cajun grilled chicken sandwich, baked potato and diet sodas. Alicia doubted she would eat much of hers. The food at The Pier was rated near the top of the best in town but she chose it for today's lunch date because of its location. She wanted the privacy of the widely scattered tables, the fresh air of the outstretched deck, the soothing sounds of the water below, and the company of someone who truly understood her.

They sat in silence until the waitress returned with their drinks then scurried away again.

“Something big is going on.” Diana rested her forearms on the tabletop as she studied Alicia. “You're upset about something, worried, but under that there is a glow about you I've never seen before. I'm getting the nagging notion that none of that has to do with William Templeton or any part of your family. So spill it, little sister. What gives?”

“Derek Kadin is currently a guest at Addison House,” Alicia blurted and watched as her friend skillfully caught her chin before it hit the table.

Diana closed her mouth, gulped, narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “I'm sorry. My hearing must have checked in at the loony bin for a brief stay. I thought you said Derek Kadin is at Addison House.”

“Your hearing is fine,” Alicia confirmed with a nod and waited for Diana to absorb the news.

“Derek Kadin,” Diana said again. “As in gorgeous, sexy, body to die for, make your panties wet with the mere sound of his voice, Derek Kadin.”

“The one and only.”

“Holy shit! How? Why? When?”

“He reserved a room—registered under an assumed name, I might add—and drove because he wanted to get away, and he showed up the day I took over the B and B.”

The waitress arrived with their sandwiches and potatoes, setting the plates in front of them.

“What's he like?” Diana asked when the waitress was out of earshot.

Alicia squirmed uncomfortably in her chair as memory of the way his mouth had felt between her legs flashed in her mind. “Incredible,” was all she managed to say.

Diana started at her, eyes wide. “Oh, my, Goddess. You slept with him!” she said on a whispered shriek.

“No. Well, not exactly. He umm...” She felt the blush rising to her cheeks as she thought of what he did to her last night. “Went down for dessert,” she finally said, amazed at how difficult it was to be blunt with her best friend after the things she said to Derek when he'd been between her legs.

“That explains the glow. What was it like? I want all the details.” Diana waggled her eyebrows, picked up her sandwich for a huge bite.

“Mind numbing. His superb voice isn't the only amazing thing that comes out of his mouth.”

“I can't believe you had sex with Derek Kadin.” Diana flung herself back in the chair, her hands braced on the edge of the table.

“We didn't have sex exactly. He just,” Alicia shrugged, “went down on me.”

“Yeah that's right. And why is that?”

“Because that's all I allowed.”

Diana leaned forward again, her mouth a gape. “That's all you... Have you lost your mind?”

“Probably.”

“You're offered a chance that hundreds, hell, *thousands* of women

can only dream about and you say no!”

“Twice.” Alicia winced. If her friend was going to yell she might as well have the complete facts.

“Oh honey, what were you thinking? And don't give me some lame excuse about being faithful to William because I know that's a crock.”

“I was thinking about my heart,” Alicia said softly, more seriously than she said anything that day.

Diana reached across the table, laid a hand over Alicia's. “You're in love with him.” She said it as more of an observation, a statement, than a question.

“No.” Alicia shook her head as tears burned behind her eyes. “I'm not so far gone that I can't distinguish the difference between lust and love. Yet.”

“But you could be.”

Alicia heaved a heavy sigh. “For over two years I've fantasized about that man, about having him, about being his. I've been nearly obsessed with the man for Pete's sake!”

“It isn't, nor has it ever been, obsession. Women fantasize about men all the time and quite often the same man for years. If that's what defines obsession then every woman in this world is guilty.”

“But how often does a woman's fantasy walk into their life?” Alicia swiped at a tear that managed to escape.

“Okay, point taken,” Diana conceded and sipped her soda. “You're one of the lucky ones, little sister. Your fantasy came true. Well, it would if you let it. Now, are you going to let him walk out of your life without fully experiencing that dream?”

Alicia picked up her fork, stabbed it into her potato. Derek *would* walk out of her life again. God, in less than a week! It could be a little longer but there was no guarantee. In less than a week he would return to Philadelphia, she would go back to her cottage and life would be back to normal—a normal where Derek Kadin only touched her in dreams, through CDs and posters. Another tear slid down her

cheek at the thought of going back to a life without him.

"You're afraid if you sleep with him you *will* fall in love?" Diana said softly, complete understanding lacing her words.

Alicia nodded and continued to stare into her plate.

"Have you ever heard the old cliché better to have loved and lost...?"

"Then to never have loved at all," Alicia finished, her voice cracking from the words and the unshed tears. She looked up and met Diana's gaze. "What are you saying?"

"If it were me," Diana splayed a flat hand over her chest, "and my fantasy man, who we both know is Reese Torrin, walked out of my dreams and into reality, I would cherish every moment I was given for as long as it was given to me."

"Even if you knew in the end you would be left with a broken heart?"

"You, my dear, are going to be left with a broken heart no matter what you do," Diana predicted. "The only possible way to avoid that is to get as far away from him as you can right now and, with your sister out of the country, that isn't an option. You may not yet be in love with Derek but you've passed the point of mere lust. Right now, you're dangling somewhere in between. How long is he registered?"

"A week but he reserved the option to stay longer."

"And you're stuck at Addison House for at least that long. Obviously, the man wants you Alicia and, if there's one thing I've learned about Derek it's that the man gets what he wants. He isn't going to give up until he gets you in his bed if that's what he's after. Do you really think you can keep saying no to him until he leaves?"

Alicia shrugged and looked away.

"Little sister, you're strong but your willpower isn't going to hold up against your attraction to the man for that long. You *will* end up in bed with him...or against a wall, or on top of a counter, or on the floor..."

Alicia laughed albeit weakly.

“My point is,” Diana went on, “you will fuck the man eventually. Wouldn't you rather spend the rest of his stay having one mind-blowing orgasm after another than simply end the week with one big bang and only have that single time to remember?”

* * * *

Yes, Alicia decided as she drove back to Addison House. She did want more than one night with Derek to remember. Making love to him once would never be enough. She wanted a lifetime. She wanted forever to be in his arms, in his bed, to simply stand beside him. But since she couldn't have that, she would be with him, love him and enjoy the ride for as long as it lasted.

The prospect of seeing him again after last night unnerved her. He hadn't left a request for room service that morning, nor had he come to the dining room for breakfast. His truck had been in the drive when she left to meet Diana for lunch so she knew he had been in the house but she decided it best not to disturb him. She wondered if she pissed him off by turning down his advances two nights in a row. Had she frustrated him to the point of giving up? She hadn't gotten that impression last night.

He hadn't seemed pissed. Quite to the contrary, he came off as completely understanding and, if anything, more determined than ever to make her give in. He gave her satisfaction last night and after, instead of expecting the same in return, they talked. She hadn't really learned anything about him she hadn't already known but it felt wonderful just the same. They sat cuddled on the sofa where he took her to oblivion only moments before and simply talked. Like many things since he arrived at Addison House, it had been a dream come true.

She would go to him tonight, she decided, and give him what he wanted, take what she wanted, or at least what he would allow her to have. The anticipation of it surged through her, making her wet. Why

wait? She wondered with a sudden rush of confidence. It was mid-afternoon. To her knowledge there was no law stating sex could only be performed at night. And if there was, it was one law she would be more than happy to break. Slap her with a hefty fine, sue her, throw her in a jail cell, she didn't give a damn. The ecstasy she would experience from making love with Derek was worth any price.

With full intentions of going straight to Derek's room and ripping off his clothes, Alicia pulled into the circular drive of Addison House and slammed on the brake so hard she nearly gave herself whiplash. Her pulse hammered like a freight train as she stared at the white Lincoln Town Car parked behind Derek's truck in the drive—William Templeton's Lincoln.

"It can't be." Stunned, she glared through the windshield. Everything inside her dried up like the Sahara Desert. "William is in Las Vegas. The car has to belong to someone else." But even as she got out of the car she knew in her bones William had come back much earlier than expected.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Addison," Debby greeted her in the foyer. "I thought I heard you pull up."

"Is that Mr. Templeton's car in the drive?"

"Yes ma'am. He's enjoying a drink on the back terrace while he waits. I told him I didn't know how long you would be gone but he insisted on sticking around."

"Is he out there alone?"

"No ma'am. Mr. Smith was hitting some balls on the tennis court with that automatic ball-pitching thing. I believe they struck up a conversation."

I bet they did, Alicia thought as she watched all her plans for the evening, any chance she had of being with Derek burst into flames. "Thank you, Debby. I will see to them now."

Heart racing, she made her way through the lower level of the house to the huge glass doors that opened onto the rear veranda. Their backs were to her. William sat on her right clad in a complete

business suit though the temperature outside was in the lower nineties. Derek sat on her left and, from what she could see, was dressed simply in a muscle shirt and shorts, a white towel rolled and draped across the back of his broad shoulders.

"There's no sense in prolonging the inevitable," Alicia told herself. She took a deep breath and stepped outside.

William was the first to spot her as she shut the doors behind her. "There you are," he said in a tone most men would reserve for conversations with their daughter who came home way after curfew. "I was hoping you would show soon. This heat out here is murderous."

"You could've stayed inside where it's cool." Try as she might, she couldn't hide the bite to her words. Despite the ninety-degree heat, she felt a brisk chill the instant she stepped outside and she didn't need a weathervane to know from which direction the chill originated. She dared a glance at Derek and her heart hit her toes. He sat looking up at her with the coldest, hardest expression she ever saw on a man's face.

He glared at her for what seemed like a lifetime but only amounted to about three seconds, then stood. "I'm going up to shower. I'm sure you would like to spend some time with your *fiancé*, Ms. Addison," he said in a voice that equally matched the harshness in his stony expression. His tone lightened a bit when he extended his hand to William. "It was good talking with you. Congratulations. That's a beautiful woman you have. I'm sure the two of you will be very happy."

Alicia fought back tears as she watched Derek disappear inside. She wanted to run after him, beg him for a chance to explain. But first she had to take care of William.

"He's attracted to you," William said dryly.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Alicia lied, turning to face him. "What are you doing here, William?"

"You don't sound happy to see me. I had hoped for a better

reception.”

“I wasn't expecting you back for several more days.”

“I will be returning to Vegas as soon as I leave here. I received a call from your mother yesterday.” He crossed his arms over his chest, taking on a formidable look. “I got the impression there were some things we needed to settle face to face.”

Alicia fought not to squirm under his hard, fixed gaze. Her mother called him. *Figures*. The woman nearly had a heart attack when Alicia told her she intended to break her engagement to William. Did Margaret think an unexpected visit from him would change her mind? *Think again, Mom.*

“You aren't wearing the ring I gave you.” His gaze dropped pointedly to her left hand.

“It's in my room. I'll get it for you. I can't marry you, William.” She said it quickly, before she had a chance to stumble, before her mother's influence had the opportunity to stop her. If she didn't marry William she would lose her mother, possibly forever. The additional trust fund she was set to receive when she turned thirty-five would be retracted. Her mother said as much. The money Alicia received when she turned twenty-one, the money she rarely touched, was only a small fraction of her complete inheritance. But she didn't care about the money. She cared about being herself, about being happy. She learned long ago that money didn't always buy happiness.

“What do you mean, you can't marry me?” Anger rang in his words. “Why the hell not?”

“I don't love you.” She hadn't meant to say it so coldly, so harsh, but that was how it came out. “I can't marry a man I don't love.” That was only part of the reason but it was a start.

“Isn't it a bit late to spring something like that on me?” he asked through clenched teeth.

He was mad. She knew he would be. It was taking every ounce of self-control he possessed not to make a scene. But it was the faint hint of pain she detected underneath it all that had her speaking more

softly, more kindly, wanting to make him understand.

"This isn't sudden William. If you could have seen me, the *real* me," she said and pointed to her chest, "you would realize that."

"I do see you Alicia. I know you. I..."

"No, you don't. You see what you want to see. You want me to be what you want me to be, not what I am." Frustrated, her hand fell to her side. She stepped away, whirled and walked back again. "I'm tired of playing games, tired of pretending. I have spent half my life being someone I'm not, trying to please everyone but me. I can't do it anymore. I *won't* do it anymore."

William shoved a hand through his golden blond hair. "Why did you agree to marry me in the first place?"

"I didn't. That's exactly my point! You asked me to marry you then slipped that ring on my finger before I could utter a word. You assumed, just like everyone else, that I would marry you. From the moment you put that ring on my finger you had our lives planned out for us and I didn't have a say in anything. You proved that when you set up that meeting with Mrs. Poindexter." She stopped, took a much needed breath. "Maybe I should have tried harder to speak, to get through to you. You are not completely at fault here. I know that and I'm not laying all the blame at your feet."

"Well, that's something, I suppose."

"I can't be the dutiful wife, William. It works for my mother and on some level it works for Star but it doesn't work for me. I'm not them. I'm Alicia but no one seems to see that."

He stared at her, silent for several heartbeats. Finally, his gaze dropped and he nodded. "You're right," he said so softly she barely heard him. "I was trying to control you. I shouldn't have." He closed the distance between them in one long stride and gently grasped her shoulders. "But I do love you, Alicia. I never said it before and you never said it to me but I love you."

Alicia met his direct gaze. "No, you don't." She raised a hand to touch his clean-shaven face. "You can't love someone you don't really

know.”

He closed his eyes, nodded slightly and stepped back. “Keep the ring. It belongs to you.”

Tears blurred her vision as she watched him leave. Everything she said to him had been what she wanted, it had been the truth, so why was she crying? Because he looked so crushed, she realized. The strong, always-in-control William Templeton had been on the verge of tears. Maybe in some way, on some level, he did love her.

No, she corrected, he loved the woman he made her inside his mind. Hurt or not, it was best this way, she decided as she began to stroll along the garden that lined the back veranda. She didn't know the names of the flowers of various vibrant colors and shapes but they were beautiful nevertheless. She wanted something like that outside her cottage and made a mental note to see if she could arrange her budget to accommodate a weekly gardener.

William would be fine, she told herself, leaning down to sniff a purple bud. In time he would realize what she did had been the best for both of them. Neither of them deserved to be trapped in a loveless marriage for the rest of their lives.

And would Derek be fine? She shielded her eyes from the sun with one hand and gazed up at the balcony stretching from his room, part of her hoping she would find him staring down at her. But the balcony was empty. He was angry. That had been crystal clear in his tone, in the way he looked at her. But how angry? Would he let her explain? Could she make him understand why she hadn't told him about William?

“There's only one way to find out,” she muttered and let out a shaky breath. Her insides rattling harder than a loose bolt in a beefed up engine, she walked into the house and headed for the third floor room. She didn't give herself time to hesitate, time to rehearse what she would say. She rapped on the door to his room, stood back and waited...and waited. She knocked again, a little louder this time but he still didn't answer.

Oh yeah, he's pissed. She considered using the master key to let herself in but quickly dismissed the idea. If he was that angry with her he might throw her off the balcony.

No, he would never do that. But he would most certainly yell at her. He would look at her with those milk chocolate eyes turned black by fury and make her feel lower than the scum of the earth. And she would deserve it. She deserved anything and everything he dished out at her. One secret may be out in the open but the other, the biggest secret, wasn't and never would be.

Resigned, she took a shaky breath and made her way downstairs to Star's office. She would let Derek steam for now but eventually she would make him listen. He couldn't avoid her. He was a guest at Addison House after all and she was the hostess. Sooner or later he would have to face her and that's when she would pounce.

The phone was ringing when she entered the office. Praying it wasn't William or her mother or even Star, she picked up the receiver.

"Hey, sister." Diana's voice was music to Alicia's ears. Somehow her friend always seemed to know when she was needed. Of course, she was a modern day witch after all. She probably had a crystal ball reserved especially for Alicia. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Mischief rang with her words.

Alicia laughed dryly. "Just another miserable moment of my life."

"Uh oh, what happened? No, wait, tell me everything tonight. Dax came in the store this afternoon with a birthday present for you."

Alicia melted into the chair behind the desk, laid her head on the back and closed her eyes. Her birthday was tomorrow. She forgot her own birthday. What were the odds?

"He said he's tried to call you a couple of times but couldn't reach you so he brought them to me," Diana continued. "It's two tickets to tonight's Sevendust concert. Can you get away? Or had you planned to spend the night in a certain someone's bed?"

Oh yeah, that's exactly what she planned but spending the night in Derek's bed would be awfully difficult if he wouldn't even let her in

his room. She thought briefly of the other guests. The Badcocks were checking out in less than an hour, the Stewarts had proclaimed over last night's cocktails their desire to spend tonight on the town and the Winchesters, though not scheduled to arrive until Monday, called just this morning to reschedule their visit for later in the month. There had been no new reservations since she took over. Soon, the Stewarts would leave too and there would be no one left in the house but her, the servants and Derek. Her heart skipped a beat. Yeah, she could get away.

“Meet me at my house,” she told Diana. “I’ll have to go there to change.”

They finalized their plans and, feeling only marginally better, she hung up the phone. A concert would be a nice release, she decided as she turned to the desktop computer. She could allow the complete Alicia Addison time to play awhile and, at the same time, give Derek time to sleep on his anger. Tomorrow, she would confront him, make him understand why she hadn't told him about William and claim her best birthday present ever...him.

Chapter Five

Alicia's screams joined with hundreds of others around her as the lights in the USF Sundome went down. Hips swaying, one arm pumping the air, she continued to cheer as the members of Sevendust hit the stage. She grinned as vocalist Lajon Witherspoon broke into the verse of the band's latest single. He was dressed in jeans and cowboy boots, a button-down cowboy shirt complete with tassels at the breast seams and a white cowboy hat. A black man, dressed as a cowboy and singing heavy metal music. Who would have thought? And damned if it wasn't sexy!

Their seats weren't the best in the venue on the first level, four sections down from the stage. Alicia and Diana had to angle themselves for a good view. Had it been a Façade concert, Alicia wouldn't have been satisfied unless she was down in the pit, directly in front of the stage. She never understood why concert settings worried about seating. To sit during a band's set at a heavy metal concert was the worst of insults. Fans were supposed to be up, moving, enjoying the show. You couldn't do that by sitting still on your ass.

Enjoying herself, Alicia flung her body into the beat of each song, singing along when she knew the words, her eyes glued to the stage as she watched the band perform for the crowd. It wasn't until halfway through the band's set that she glanced from the stage, her gaze landing on a tall man with dark hair two sections away. She narrowed her eyes, forcing them to focus on the face in the flashing lights from the stage. It couldn't be. Could it? But it looked so much like him.

A white spotlight bathed the crowd section by section. Just as the

light landed on the dark haired man he moved and she saw past him. Derek stood on the man's other side. Alicia's heart stopped. There was no mistaking the shaved head and the muscular build clad in a black shirt and black leather pants. The tall dark haired man she had first spotted was Reese Torrin, the drummer for Façade.

Alicia felt her blood pressure soar and, in the heat of the Sundome, she thought for a moment she might faint. Had he seen her? Had he recognized her if he had? Obviously not. Surely he would have said something to her if he realized she was there.

She stared at him, moving slightly when Reese or someone else blocked her view. Derek appeared to be having a good time, enjoying the show just like every other fan in the place. The people around him—if they recognized him as the vocalist for Façade—seemed to be leaving him alone. No, he hadn't seen her. She was sure of it. Now all she had to do was make certain he didn't spot her. She had no believable excuse for being there. The prim and proper Alicia Addison, the woman Derek thought she was, would never attend a Sevendust concert and certainly not dressed in a Façade shirt tucked into a pair of skin-tight black jeans and combat boots.

Alicia felt a hand on her shoulder and nearly jumped out of her skin. Diana leaned into her, yelling to be heard over the music and screams. “What's the matter? You're standing there like a statue.”

Alicia looked over her shoulder at her friend. “Derek is over there.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in but she saw it in Diana's expression the instant they did. “Where?” Her gaze searched the crowd in the direction Alicia had been looking. Then her jaw dropped. “Is that Reese with him?”

“Yeah, that's him. You have to help me. Derek can't see me here.”

“Why not?”

“He doesn't know that I know who he is. He doesn't even know I listen to heavy metal.”

Diana looked at her with narrowed, confused eyes.

"It's a long story." Alicia shook her head. "Simply put, if you expect me to take your advice and fall into bed with that man before he leaves town he can't see me at this concert."

Diana still didn't understand but, friend that she was, she nodded, no more questions asked. "Reese is leaving. I bet he's going to get a beer."

"You can't leave me!" Alicia gripped Diana's arm, a chill sweeping through her despite the sweat that seeped out of her every pore.

"There's a crowd of people around us. Besides, Derek hasn't looked away from the stage. I can't pass up a chance to talk to Reese." Diana tugged her arm away, her gaze a mixture of pleading and excitement. "If Derek looks this way, hide behind someone. I promise I won't be gone long."

And to Diana's credit, she wasn't. She returned in less than ten minutes carrying two cups of beer and sporting a gleaming smile from ear to ear.

"I take it you met Reese." Alicia accepted the beer, took a large gulp. It smelled awful and tasted even worse but it was cold, wet and alcoholic.

Diana nodded. "I met him, got his autograph on my ticket stub along with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. He even insisted on paying for these beers." Her eyes went dreamy. "And he's the self-proclaimed ass hole of the band. Yeah right. He said he's only in town for the night, passing through on his way to West Palm Beach. He didn't say anything about Derek. Did he see you?"

Alicia hadn't been able to take her eyes off Derek since she first spotted him. He'd only glanced in her direction once and she quickly ducked, acting as if she dropped something on the floor. "No, at least I don't think so. This is the band's last song. As soon as it's over let's make a dash for the door."

* * * *

Alicia rapped one arm around the wooden post of the veranda. The palm of her other hand splayed on the side as she rested her head against the post and stared at the lean, muscular body skillfully making its way down the length of the swimming pool. That's how she was standing when Derek spotted her. The morning sun illuminated her like an angel. She was indeed a vision in a purple robe that glistened like satin and stopped just above her knees. Her legs and feet were bare, her hair loose and free flowing. A small gust of wind caught the edges of her robe, blowing it open just enough to reveal the matching purple bikini she wore beneath.

He felt the stirrings of arousal in his groin as he treaded the water in the deep end of the pool. How long had she been standing there watching him? She was looking at him but not meeting his gaze.

Because she thinks you're angry with her. And he was. Not quite as much as he had been yesterday afternoon, but the fury was still there on some level. His first reaction upon hearing the news of her engagement, from her fiancé, no less, had been utter shock, disbelief. She allowed him to kiss her, *eat her* for Christ's sake, knowing all the while she promised herself to another man. It wasn't the first time he had been deceived in such a way, but he hadn't expected Alicia to be the deceptive type. On the other hand, how much did he really know about Alicia Addison? Not a whole hell of a lot.

After having some time to let go at last night's concert, spend a few hours with his close friend and band mate, Reese, and sleep on his anger, Derek awoke with a new outlook on the situation. He wanted her. After the things he did to her the other night, he wanted her even more. But it was physical attraction, sexual desire, emotions he was used to. If this beautiful creature wanted one last fling before her wedding night he was up for that. He would be leaving in a few days, returning to his life as a heavy metal star, returning to the limelight.

He would always remember Alicia of course. He would look back on the time they spent together, the things they did and remember

them fondly. There were no deep emotional feelings between them, no ties, no chance of either of them being hurt. The tug he felt in his chest was simply another indication of how bad his cock wanted her. Once he was inside her, once he left Addison House, he would have her out of his system.

She pushed herself away from the post and started walking toward the pool, still not meeting his gaze. He swam to shallow water, stopped at the half-circle steps and stood, extended a hand. "Coming for a swim?"

She hesitated, finally looking him in the eyes. He saw her nervousness, uncertainty and the smallest hint of fear before she looked away. Slowly, so painstakingly bit by bit to his growing erection, she peeled off her robe, draped it over the arm of a near-by lounge chair. When she put her hand in his, he felt her shaking. He would have suspected her cold had it not been for the ninety-degree temperature of the air around them. No, it was complete nervousness. What did she think he was going to do? Try to drown her?

He heard her breath catch as she stepped into the water, knew the cooler temperature was a shock to the system, and gave her a moment to let her body adjust.

"I guess there is something I can do to make you angry after all." Her voice wobbled a bad as the hand he still held in his. She met his gaze, glanced away, and looked back at him again.

"Would you like to explain?" He didn't miss the glimmer of tears that rose to her eyes at his question and felt a tug in his chest. *Oh shit! Don't cry. Please don't cry.*

"If..." She blinked several times in rapid succession obviously attempting to ward off the tears. "If you will let me."

He nodded. "Do you want to sit down?"

* * * *

Alicia lowered herself to the third of the five steps. The level of

the water hit her just below her breasts. She took a deep breath that was harder with the weight of the water on her body, with the weight of the anxiety inside her. God, this was even more difficult than she thought it would be. She prepared herself for his anger, indignation, not for the affable kindness he was showing her.

He sat down too, one step lower than her and looked up, his gaze searching, inspecting. Because she found herself unable to meet his eyes, she dropped her gaze to the water. Not a good idea. His shorts were tight, more so in the groin area, where the obvious beginnings of an erection stretched the material covering his crotch. The bulge jumped. The slightest of movement that told her he flexed his dick on purpose. He knew what she was looking at.

Her gaze darted to his eyes and she saw the hint of amusement there. She tilted her head to one side as disbelief coursed through her. "You aren't as angry with me as I thought, are you?"

"Oh, I'm angry." His expression was instantly serious. "It's lessened some since yesterday but you're not getting off the hook that easy. He, on the other hand..." Derek glanced down, flexed himself again. "Let's just say he has a mind of his own."

Alicia would have smiled at that had she not been so torn up inside. "I'm not marrying William." She fixed her eyes on Derek's face and waited to see his reaction. What she saw sent a chill through her. It was like a slide show, each click a different emotion. Surprise came first followed by disbelief, fear, worry and finally pausing on concern before going completely blank. She knew in that instant what he was thinking. It was because of him that she decided not to marry William. He thought she had come to expect more from what was happening between them than a casual fling while he was in town.

"That's why I didn't tell you about him," she rushed on. "I made up my mind days ago that I wasn't going to marry him. I don't love him. It's a long story as to how I ended up engaged to him in the first place but it was never what I wanted."

"Days ago?" he repeated, one brow arching.

“Yes,” she said and, knowing what he was getting at, knowing days could mean the moment she laid eyes on him, she added, “before you came to Addison House.”

The relief that washed over his expression made her want to weep. If she ever entertained the thought that whatever began between them during his stay would continue after he left, that dream had now been put to rest. If she were to enjoy the thrill of being Derek Kadin's woman she better seize the opportunity now because chances like this were only offered once in a life time.

“I...” She hesitated. “I don't suppose we can pick up where we left off before all of this?”

The corners of his lips twitched. “That depends.”

“On?” She lifted one brow in question.

“We both know where we left off, Alicia.” He placed his hands on her knees, pulled her legs apart as he got up and moved between them. He pulled her to him until she straddled his waist.

Oh yeah, he was hard all right. She felt his erection flush against her groin and couldn't stop the moan that sounded from low in her throat.

He leaned into her and nibbled her ear lobe. “We also know what comes next,” he whispered in her ear. “No pun intended.”

She could hear the smile in his voice. The warmth of his breath in her ear, against the sensitive skin on her neck, brought nerve ending she hadn't known existed to the surface.

“I can accept no as an answer but only for so long.” He licked the side of her neck from her ear to her shoulder, leaving a trail of blazing heat the best fire department in the country couldn't put out. By the time he finally pulled back to look at her, her bikini bottom was wet from more than just the pool water. “We've both known where this would lead almost from the moment you opened the door my first night here. I know you want me and I believe I've made it abundantly clear how bad I want you. So the question is, are you ready to give in to what you want?”

Alicia gulped, nodded. "It will be my birthday present to myself," she said breathlessly.

"Today is your birthday?"

She nodded again and the mischief that darkened his eyes caused her pussy to clench in anticipation.

* * * *

Alicia couldn't remember ever being so nervous. Her hands shook with it as she pulled the dress she selected for the evening from the closet. It was black, of course. Derek's favorite color, she knew. She purchased the dress on a whim some months ago, paying more for it than the real Alicia Addison would normally pay for a single article of clothing. She didn't wear dresses unless she was masquerading as her prim and proper twin and this dress was far from her twin's style. Because of this, the dress hung in her closet since the date of purchase, unworn and waiting for its time to be needed. Little had she known that time would be a date with Derek Kadin.

Careful not to wrinkle the delicate material, she stepped into the dress, tugged it up and into place and sighed as the cool silk formed to her curves. She stepped to the full-length mirror and surveyed the results. The bodice was cut way low, putting her braless cleavage on display. The silk hugged her hips like a second skin, the skirt stopping at mid-thigh. Slowly, she turned and looked over her shoulder. Her back was completely exposed, but for the two narrow straps that connected just above her ass and stretched over her shoulders. Derek would like that, she mused, knowing the small of a woman's back was his favorite part of the female body. Anticipation coursed through her at the thought of his large hand splayed there.

She had to admit she had great legs and decided to forgo stockings. Less to take off. Butterflies began one hell of a mosh pit deep in her stomach at the thought. A small tug to free her shoulders and arms from the thin straps and she would be completely naked.

Absently, she hoped she wasn't making it too easy for him.

She stepped into the solid black one-inch heels—she didn't want to be taller than him tonight, and again checked her reflection in the mirror. She left her hair down, allowed it to fall where it may. He seemed to like it best that way. She wore only a touch of eye shadow, blusher, and a frosty lip-gloss for color. She took a ragged breath and saw her reflection shake visibly in the mirror.

“Girl, you have got to calm down,” she said to the striking woman staring back at her. But how could she? She had no idea what Derek had in store for her tonight. Okay, yeah, no matter what happened prior to, they would without a doubt end up between the sheets...or on top of the sheets...or maybe not even make it to the bed at all.

She shivered. That single thought alone was enough to make her heart beat out of her chest. But he had something more in mind. She didn't know what but it hadn't been simply the prospect of a night of hot sex—and oh sweet Jesus a night of sex with Derek Kadin would be thermometer busting—that brought that look of mischief to his eyes that morning in the pool. No, she had a feeling the man was about to rock her world more than he ever did for a crowd of thousands of screaming fans combined.

They had gone their separate ways after their morning swim, each returning to their own rooms to shower and change. She half expected him to pull her straight to bed upon hearing she was finally ready to fully give in to their mutual desire. Hell, who was she kidding? She had wanted him to take her right there in the pool! Instead, he expressed his need to take care of a few errands and set an early date for seven in the evening. With only the Stewarts left as guests other than Derek, it was much easier for Alicia to have the full night to spend with him.

Though it was her birthday, the arrangement had been for the best. The operations of Addison House didn't stop simply because its current hostess was turning a year older. Alicia spent much of the day, minus the short trip she made to her cottage to pick up the dress,

behind the closed door of the office completing paperwork, revising the B and B's website she was building for Star, and accepting reservations for the coming weeks.

Derek left for several hours at mid-day. She had been walking through the front of the house in search of Debby when she heard his truck start up. She watched through the window as it disappeared down the road. Where had he gone? She was dying to know. But it was none of her business, she knew. She had no strings on him, no claim to know what he did with his time.

And you never will, her subconscious warned. She ignored it, refusing to think about that now. Tonight she would be living her ultimate dream and no amount of reality was going to spoil it. Tonight she was Cinderella and Derek her prince charming. Anything and everything, all the emotions, the feelings, the scents, the actions, would be noted and filed away in a special book in her mind, a book written specifically for the best night of her life, her first and, quite possibly only, night with Derek Kadin.

* * * *

He wasn't sure what possessed him to do all of this. All Derek knew was he felt the need to make tonight special for Alicia. It had been a long time since he wined and dined a woman before sleeping with her. When a man spent night after night for extended periods of time on the road as he did such gentleman luxuries were not often possible. But he wasn't on the road now. He would be here tomorrow when he woke and for at least a few more days after that.

Singing along to an older hit by A Perfect Circle that played softly on the stereo, he mentally checked off the items on his list that he hoped to accomplish before Alicia's arrival. Roses? Check. Candles? Check. Dinner? Check. Gift? *Hope she likes it.* Check. He was still moving down his list when he heard the soft knock at the door. He made a quick sweeping glance around the rooms and walked to the

door.

His palms were sweating. Was he actually nervous? No way! Pushing the absurd thought aside, he wrenched open the door and felt his breath lodge in his throat. If he thought her a vision before, the woman standing before him now was no comparison. She looked like a gothic goddess decked in quite possibly the sexiest dress he ever saw. He had to fight the almost overwhelming urge to pull her into his arms, slam her against the wall, and pull up the skirt of the dress and his cock inside her right then and there.

Alicia's reaction to Derek was much in the same. He dressed up for her. Black slacks, white long sleeve button-down shirt that formed to every ripple in his chest and arms and a deep maroon tie. To see a man who so rarely wore anything different from leather pants or black shorts and muscle shirts clad in the makings of a suit made everything inside her turn to butter.

He didn't speak, didn't smile. He simply gazed at her with a heat in his eyes that warmed her to her very core and extended his hand. She took it, stepped inside and gasped. The room was lit only by the flickering light of the candles scattered about, the furniture repositioned to accommodate the small round table he moved from the other room. On it sat two candles on either side of a single red rose, two plates with stainless steel covers, two glasses, a bottle of wine and a small wrapped box.

Eyes wide, Alicia turned to him. "Derek, you shouldn't have."

"And why not?" He drew her to him. She felt one hand lay flat on the bare skin at the small of her back and reveled in the feel of it, as she had known she would. His other hand still held hers and he raised it to his mouth, brushed his lips over her knuckles. Fireworks exploded inside her. "It's your birthday. I wanted tonight to be special."

Any night, any minute, any second that I get to be with you is special. She felt a tightening in her throat as she gazed into his eyes. She hadn't known what to expect from tonight other than what she

was certain would be mind-blowing sex but this was a page taken out of her most guarded, most secret book of fantasies.

“Nervous?” he asked softly, his fingers curling in then stretching out again in a tender caress on her back.

“A little.” Even her voice shook. How could she lie when it was so clearly obvious?

“There's no need to be, Alicia.” She was sure his tone was meant to be comforting, soothing but it flowed over her like a gentle wave, capturing her, pulling her under. “I know what I said this morning but nothing has to happen tonight that you don't want to happen.”

Unable to speak, she nodded.

He released her hand but his other stayed on the small of her back. With a gentle push, he propelled her to the table. He held her chair for her as she sat then poured two glasses of wine and removed the covers from the plates before taking the seat across from her.

Absently, she noted the music playing softly through the room. She knew the band, recognized the song. She wondered what CD he would choose for tonight. She read that his favorite bands to have playing in the background during sex were Soundgarden, A Perfect Circle and Type O Negative and hoped he would select the latter as it was her favorite of the three. The song *Love You to Death* was her choice when she dreamt of an intimate night like this with Derek Kadin. But she couldn't tell him that without giving herself away.

She glanced down at her plate instead, looked up at him in surprise. “Blackened chicken and steamed vegetables, you really piled on the charm with Wilma to get this, didn't you?”

He returned her gaze with a smile that reached his eyes. In the flickering candlelight they were like melting chocolate and oh so erotic. “She's an interesting woman and seems to know you well. She said this was your favorite.”

“It is.”

Derek picked up his wine glass, hesitated. “Should we toast to your birthday?”

Alicia picked up her own glass, shook her head. “No.” She stretched her arm across the edge of the table, mindful of the rose and candles in the center. “To tonight. To pushing all thoughts of reality and tomorrow aside and taking what you want.”

He stared at her as he lightly tapped his glass to hers, his expression odd. Her heart pounded in her chest. Had she said too much? Was that suspicion on his face?

“To tonight,” he echoed and sipped the wine.

Alicia wanted to guzzle her glass, the whole damn bottle! A part of her needed the calming effect the alcohol would have on her. But another part, the biggest part, didn't want anything to numb her senses this evening. She settled for a small sip. “This wine is perfect.” She sat her glass on the table between her plate and the small wrapped box. What was in it? “For the meal, I mean.”

“Another point for Wilma. I've never been good at paring wine with food.”

Alicia smiled. “Neither have I.”

“Shall we?” He picked up his fork.

Feeling the need for conversation as they ate and simply wanting to hear him talk, Alicia asked, “Have you decided if you will be staying longer than a week?” There were so many other questions she wanted to ask, so much she wanted to know about him, but asking them would give her away. Tonight was not the night to unveil secrets. But the need to tell him the truth was mounting inside her, gaining a weight that was becoming increasingly harder to carry around. She would tell him tomorrow.

Though she hadn't thought her question to be anything more than a casual attempt at conversation, Derek apparently sensed something more behind her words because his fork stopped in mid-air to his mouth. “Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay longer,” he said slowly, his expression unreadable. God, what was he thinking? “I had hoped to stay at least another week but we...” He stopped abruptly, swallowed. “There are some things that have come up at home that I

have to take care of.”

“I hope it's nothing serious,” Alicia said, the wheels in her head spinning. Had something happened with the band? She was certain that was the *we* he almost spoke of. She would have to pop in on the message board, see if there had been any announcements she missed.

“No, just work.” He unknowingly confirmed her suspicions as he took a bite of the chicken. “This is delicious. I can see why it's your favorite.”

“Wilma is a wonderful cook.” And if Alicia could find her appetite her plate would be cleaned in the blink of an eye. Instead, she only managed a few bites. The anticipation, the desire, the nervousness was too heavy on her stomach to accommodate much food. “What kind of work do you do?” She nearly sat on the edge of her seat as she waited for his answer. Would he tell her the truth? She glanced at the box again to keep from appearing too eager.

“I'm in the entertainment industry.”

Okay, well, that was partly true. He was simply lying by omission.

“Is curiosity getting the best of you?” Amusement laced his words. “You can open it.”

She accepted the abrupt change of subject, her curiosity indeed getting to her. “I can't believe you bought me a present.” She picked up the box.

“Isn't that a tradition on someone's birthday?”

“Yes, but...” Her words trailed off as she carefully removed the wrapping paper and slowly lifted the lid from the box. She stared at the necklace inside in utter disbelief.

“I wasn't exactly sure what you would like so I went with something I like instead.” He propped his elbows on the tabletop, rested his chin on his fist as he watched her. “The clerk at the store where I bought it said she knows you and thought you would like it.”

She knows I love it, Alicia thought, knowing exactly who he talked to and where he bought the necklace. It was a pentagram set in a reef of vines, sterling silver and attached to an eighteen-inch sterling

silver chain. She had goggled over it since she first laid eyes on it in the All Things Magical jewelry case and Diana knew how bad she wanted it.

"I do," she said on a choked breath. "It's beautiful." Her fingers shook as she gently picked up the chain and pulled it out of the box.

"I noticed that you don't wear a lot of jewelry." Derek stood, walked around the table. "But when you do, it's silver instead of gold."

"I've always preferred silver to gold."

"So have I, especially against a woman's skin." He reached out, took the necklace from her, held it in front of her as he moved to clasp it around her neck. She aided him by gathering the back of her hair into her fist. "Though I'm not a Wiccan or a Pagan or anything or the sort, I like Goth stuff. I thought this would stand out in your jewelry box enough that you would always remember where it came from."

Oh God. Tears burned her eyes. Even if he wasn't Derek Kadin, even if he wasn't the vocalist of her favorite band, there was no way she could ever forget the man who gave her this necklace. And there was no way the necklace would ever become buried in her jewelry box. She would wear it always, forever close to her heart just like the man who bought it.

She fought to keep her breath steady as not to alert him to the tears she rapidly blinked away as she felt the coolness of the silver chain settle around her neck. She released her hair and brought her hand down to fold around the pendant. She ran her thumb lightly over the pentagram and foolishly hoped Diana put some sort of spell on the charm that would make Derek forever hers just as the necklace would be. It was a foolish wish, she knew, because Diana once told her that spells effecting matters of the heart were wrong and the devastation they reaped would come back times three.

Holding her hair aside with one hand, Derek leaned into her and nuzzled his face at her ear. "Happy birthday, Alicia." He gently nibbled her earlobe.

The sensation of the sensuous act washed over her. Her eyes closed involuntarily as he swept his tongue in her ear then slowly licked his way down her neck to her shoulder.

“You look amazing in this dress,” he whispered against her skin. “Have I told you that yet?”

“No.” She said it so softly she doubted he heard her. His hands danced down her sides and she felt a gentle tug at her waist compelling her to rise. She did, praying that her jellified legs would support her weight.

He pulled her into his arms without hesitation, her arms instinctively rising to encircle his neck. He glanced down at the pendant that rested just above her exposed cleavage. “You wear it well,” he said softly and smiled. “I knew you would.”

“I’ll never take it off,” she breathed and regretted her words when she felt his arms stiffen around her waist. *Shit! You’re going to ruin it.*

The sudden tension she sensed in his arms took on a possessive feel, pulling her more tightly to him. Her body molded itself to his as his mouth crushed hers in an equally dominating kiss. Unlike the others they shared, this wasn’t a kiss to tease, to arouse. It was the kind that was meant to capture, to possess, to make her his and, even if he only meant to make her his for the night, she was open and helpless and there for the taking.

He ravaged her mouth, slowly back-stepping her to the bedroom, stopping beside the bed. Her head fell back on a moan as his lips left hers to trail kisses down her neck. She felt his hands move up her back to hook one finger under each strap of her dress, leaned in to bury his face in her hair. “If you’re having any second thoughts at all, think you will have any regrets in the morning, tell me now. Once I have you naked I won’t be able to stop this time.”

Stop! Oh dear heavens above please don’t stop. Unable to say the words, she answered him instead by slipping a hand between them and boldly cupping his cock. His intake of breath was quick, shocked and brought a smile to her face. Experimentally, she gently squeezed

his rock-hard erection and knew the low moan that her pressured touch drew out of him would forever play on repeat in her mind.

It was all the answer he needed. With one practiced fluid motion, he pulled the straps from her shoulders and the dress fell from her body. He gazed down at her, took in her nakedness with a slow, easy, appreciative appraisal. "God knows I am not complaining sweetheart, but do you own any underwear?"

Alicia let out a nervous laugh. "A few pieces."

"Throw them out." His voice became hoarse as his hands began to explore. "These curves," he lifted her breasts with his palms, "are far too perfect to be confined." He bent slightly and drew one breast into his mouth.

Alicia's hand slid over his shaved head, loving the feel of his skin under her palm, and gripped the back of his neck as he feasted on first one breast and then the other. The feel of his mouth on her, the tender way he nibbled at her nipples with his teeth was more sensational than anything she ever known. So much so that when he pulled away and straightened before her, she nearly wept.

They gazed wordlessly at one another under the dim stars sparkling from the ceiling. Alicia didn't wait for an invitation, couldn't wait for him to make the next move. Keeping her gaze locked with his, she reached up to undo his tie.

When the knot was released, his hands joined hers to pull the tie from around his neck. Grasping it at both ends, he brought it over her head, draped it across the back of her neck and used it to pull her head to him for another soul steeling kiss. His movements were so quick, so tenderly forceful they sent an agonizing throb straight to her groin.

Her hands still between them, she quickly fumbled to release the buttons on his shirt. She managed to get the first three undone before frustration took over. She gripped one side of the material in each hand and pulled, popping the remaining buttons and effectively exposing the chest she so desperately wanted to feel.

Pleasantly surprised, he broke the kiss, leaned back slightly to

look at her, one brow raised and amusement twinkling in his eyes.

She bit her bottom lip to hold back a grin. "Sorry. I'll buy you another one." She submerged her fingers in the dark curls covering his chest. His quick intake of breath was surprising and satisfying.

"Please, keep going. I doubt I'll ever wear these clothes again anyway." As he spoke, he purposely popped the buttons binding the shirt to his wrists and removed the garment, discarding it to the floor.

"In that case..." Alicia trickled the tip of one fingernail down his chest, following the trail of curls leading down his tight abdomen and stomach to the waistband of his slacks. Gripping the overlapping flap with two fingers, she tugged, snapping the button there too. "Not very well put together, are they?"

He laughed, a breathless, husky sound she'd never heard from him. "I take it nothing gets in your way when you set your eyes on something you want."

"Not a thing," she affirmed, pulling the flap of his pants a little harder. The sound of the zipper ripping echoed through the room. "You and I are alike in that way at least."

"That we are." His breath grew ragged as her hands moved over him, tugged down his ruined slacks to reveal a pair of solid black briefs.

She tsked. "You're trying to make me work for him, aren't you?" She pulled down the briefs before he could respond.

His cock sprang out before darting up to lay flat against his stomach. Alicia stared. She knew she failed to hide her surprise when she heard him make the slightest of laughs. The laugh halted on a sharply drawn in breath when she wrapped her fingers around his erection. He was thick, much thicker than she gauged from the bulge she often admired behind the confines of his leather pants.

Her hand slowly pumped his cock in an up-down slide, testing the ample length. She heard the air rush from his lungs as she lightly skimmed her thumb over the pre-cum beading on the tip. Her mouth watered wanting to taste him, wanting to wrap her lips around his

engorged cock and see just how much of his length she could take.

Before she could act on that desire, Derek cupped her chin in his hand, drawing her gaze to his. His expression was serious, all the heat, all the arousal inside him depicted in his eyes.

She released his cock, her arms moving up to their place around his neck as his mouth slammed on hers. Their tongues twisted, tangled, and began a two-person mosh pit in the darkness of their mouths. He fisted the hair at the nape of her neck in one hand while the other pulled her closer with gentle force on the small of her back.

Alicia moved one leg around his opening herself, pushing her lower body against his and rocked, grinding the outer folds of her pussy against his stiff dick. He groaned into her mouth, his hand releasing her hair as both hands moved to cup her buttocks. When he lifted her, she wrapped her legs around his waist locking her ankles behind his back. Slowly, tenderly, as though she were a delicate rose petal, he lowered them both to the bed never breaking the kiss or the hold they had on each other.

He pushed a hand between them, found the narrow patch of curls that led to her open sex. She was wet, throbbing, burning with need. He broke the kiss, caressed her cheek with his free hand, looking down at her as he delved a finger inside her aching channel. Her eyes closed as the pleasure swept through her. She unlocked her ankles, planted her feet flat on either side of them, her knees bent. She pushed into the mattress and lifted her hips off the bed to meet his inward plunge. His finger withdrew, slid up to her swollen clit and began a slow agonizing massage. The pressure increased inside her, begging for release.

“Derek.” His name was a hoarse cry in the silence broken only by the quiet sound of music drifting from the other room. It was then that she heard it, the soft piano melody of her song, their song just beginning to play.

“Let go Alicia.” He whispered it as he continued to massage her bud, pulling her closer to the climax she so desperately needed. “Cum

for me. This is only the first of many orgasms I plan to give you tonight.”

Lost in his voice, in the song, she exploded. Her inner muscles pulsed. Her body trembled as her feminine juices flooded out of her. When she opened her eyes it was to find him still looking down at her, a tender smile curving his lips.

In the other room, the song reached its second verse as Peter Steele sang of lipstick stains and red wine. With a jittery hand, she touched the side of Derek's face as she gazed deeply into his liquid brown eyes.

She was drowning. Her throat tightened and she knew even with the pleasure he just gave her, with his promise of much more to come, he was killing her bit by bit. After tonight, after sharing this amazing intimacy with him, she would never be the same.

He lowered his face to hers, brushed his lips over hers in a kiss so soft, so loving her stomach turned flips. “I want to be inside you, Alicia.” He gazed at her with an intimacy that shot straight to her middle re-igniting the burn for him. “Are you ready to feel me inside you?”

She smoothed her palm over his cheek, skimmed her thumb across his lips. She swallowed, loosening the pressure in her throat, easing her desire to cry. “Yes, I want to feel you. All of you.”

Between them, he quickly sheathed himself with a condom that seemingly appeared out of nowhere, took his erection in his hand and guided it to her sopping opening. He stopped just short of entering her.

“Don't close your eyes this time. I want to see your face as I take you.”

Alicia took a deep trembling breath, locked her gaze with his, and nodded. He eased his cock into her, inch by gloriously hard inch. She gasped, her eyes widening in their battle not to close under the riot of sensations ricocheting through her. She spread her legs wider as he thrust in another inch, her womb opening to accommodate his length

and thickness.

“Are you alright?”

She nodded and he pushed a little more. Everything inside her opened for him, taking him, and when she thought she couldn't take any more he thrust deeper still, filling her to capacity and beyond until he pushed his way through the flimsy door to her heart. A single tear escaped and trickled down the side of her face.

Chapter Six

Derek stopped, buried inside her to the hilt, and gazed at her with an expression that was indescribable. The hand beside her head moved to brush away the tear. Alicia blinked, forcing back the others that wanted to follow.

Praying he wouldn't ask why she was crying, she writhed beneath him. The passion in his eyes darkened and he began to move with her, slowly sliding in and out of her, setting a pace that was both tantalizing and satisfying.

He rested his weight on one hand as he brought the other to her breast. He cupped her breast, massaging it before catching her hardened nipple between his thumb and forefinger and giving it a gentle squeeze. Electricity soared through her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her heels pushing into his buttocks, pulling him inside her as deep as he could go on each inward thrust. Her arms around his shoulders, her nails dug into his back as the dance picked up pace.

She groaned and the sound seemed to excite him more. He slammed inside her, his body crashing against her clit until every part of her sizzled from the mounting climax inside her. "Derek." The word came on a gasp as her body met his stroke for stroke, unwilling and un-wanting to stop the sparks that were less than a breath away from igniting. "Cum with me, Derek." There was more plea in that one request than she would have liked but she hadn't the time to worry about it now.

"Okay baby."

The sound of that voice she so loved combined with the pleasures

rocking her insides. It was enough to push her over the edge. She cried out as he thrust hard and deep into her. A riot of colored explosions flashed before her eyes and through them she saw his face tightening as he grunted from his own release.

Spent as much as she, he fell on top of her nuzzling his face in the curve of her neck. She held him tight, staring at the twinkling stars in the ceiling, listening to their rapid hearts seeming to beat as one. She didn't allow herself to think about tomorrow for fear she would cry again. There had been too many close calls tonight as it was. For now, she would simply revel in the feel of holding the man she loved. And she did love him now. Over the past few days he pushed himself into her heart, into her very soul and she had been powerless to stop him.

"I could stay like this forever," he muttered against her neck.

Her heart simply bled. *Oh Derek. If you only meant that.* She sighed inwardly and pushed the thought aside with all the others. "You're welcome to. I'm too weak to stop you." *Too weak in more ways than you know.*

He lifted his head, planted a kiss on her lips and rolled off her, pulling his cock out of her in the process. She immediately felt the emptiness, the dire need to have him back inside her. He removed the used condom, tossed it to the floor and stretched out on his side next to her.

At least he's still in the bed with you. The thought was more comforting than she would've deemed possible. What happened next? What was she supposed to do? Did he expect her to get dressed and go down stairs to her own room? And what was she supposed to say? Thank you for the most mind-blowing, out of this world, incredible sex she'd ever had?

"I'm thirsty." He sat up and shot her a look. "Are you?"

Alicia studied him, searching his expression for any indication of what he expected from her. All she saw was the glint of a sexually satisfied man. She swallowed, winced at the dryness in her throat, and nodded.

He leaned over her and kissed the tip of her nose. “Stay here. I’ll get us a drink.”

Stay here. His words echoed in her mind. Well, there was her answer. He didn’t expect her to leave, at least, not yet.

She rolled on her side, propped her head on her hand, and watched him as he crawled from the bed and walked to the bar. Obviously his state of undress didn’t bother him. He was a man completely comfortable with his nakedness. And why shouldn’t he be. His body was amazing! Arousal stirred in her core as she stared at his firm perfect ass. The man’s back view was nearly as enticing as the front.

He poured a larger glass of Crown, turned. She let her gaze explore his naked body as he returned to the bed. So beautiful, so exquisite. Some men looked better in clothes, but not this one. Every inch of him was hard-toned muscle and rigid temptation. He had the body of a Greek God, the voice of an angel, and the features of a GQ cover model. Perfection personified, she thought as the lust pooled in her belly, and, for the moment at least, all hers.

The bed gave under his weight as he sat next to her, took a long swig of the Crown before holding the glass out for her. “I thought we could share.”

Alicia pushed herself up, accepted the glass he offered and stole a large gulp. As she drank, he moved to rest his back against the wrought iron headboard.

* * * *

Derek gazed at her, her skin still flush from sex, her hair tangled and wild around her face, and couldn’t get past how absolutely beautiful she was at that moment.

“Come here.” He slipped an arm around her waist and drew her back to lean against his side. She settled in, resting her head on his chest. His fingers absently dance along her ribcage as he buried his nose in her hair. The smell of an exotic flowered shampoo mixed with

the lingering scents of sweat and sex in the room making the atmosphere even more erotic.

He too was lingering, he knew, and he could scarcely remember the last time he did so after fucking a woman. Not just because there was rarely enough time to stick around before he and the guys in the band hit the road for their next show. Though many of the women he had been with in the recent past had been incredible in their own unique way, not one of them awakened the need to stay, the need for more that Alicia did tonight, *hell, be honest man*, the moment he set eyes on her.

It frightened him and the tear he wiped from her face scared him even more. Yet, when she looked up at him with all the mounting nervousness and uncertainty clear in her eyes, he felt the fear give in to the tug growing harder in his chest.

“Stay with me tonight?” He said it as more of a question, a request, than an order. Surprise flickered across her face before all the tension he sensed inside her seemed to disappear in an instant.

“Yes.” She held up the glass, waited for him to take it, and then her fingers began a tantalizing dance on his chest.

Everything inside him went weak. Fearing he would drop the glass, he set it on the bedside table, and covered her hand with his. He leaned his head back on the headboard and closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment to wallow in the wonder, the sheer pleasure of her feminine touch on his skin.

She started to kiss him, her soft sensuous lips and warm tongue leaving sparks of desire as they explored his chest. He hadn't thought it possible so soon after the massive climax she gave him, but he felt himself growing hard again with each touch of her lips, each swipe of her tongue.

Blindly, as his eyes were still closed, he rubbed his hand over her back letting her know he was still awake and enjoying her kisses. When he felt her body shift, her mouth move to his abs, his breath caught. Was she about to? No. She wouldn't. Would she? But then he

felt her long delicate fingers wrap around his shaft and *oh man* she was. His eyes popped open to find her looking back at him, a devious grin curving her succulent lips.

“Ah, so you are still awake.” She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and his cock jumped in her hand. “Do you want me to stop?”

Derek chuckled. He couldn't help it. She looked so adorable completely naked but for the necklace he'd given her, her hair draped over one shoulder, on her knees and leaning over him with his dick in her hand. Adorable? Oh no. The woman looked sexy as hell.

“No baby, the last thing I want is for you to stop but...”

Her smile returned and her hand began to gently pump his shaft effectively cutting off his protest. “In that case, settle back and enjoy.”

He considered arguing, asking her to at least move into a position where he would have access to the warm treasure of her pussy so he could pleasure her as well. He even opened his mouth to speak, and then nearly bit his tongue when she enclosed her lips around the head of his cock.

She started slow, licking his shaft into her mouth, sucking his length until her lips met with the flush line of skin at the base of his cock. His eyes rolled back in his head as she eased back, her teeth grazing the sensitive skin. He was fully hard. How the hell could he not be? And she took him, all of him. The sweet suckling sounds drove him wild as she took him deeper into her mouth, swallowed his length down her throat.

“Geezus, Alicia!” She giggled, the muffled sound vibrating over his shaft, sending pinpricks of pleasure rocketing up his spine. She was enjoying herself, the little winch, trying to make him lose control. And damn if she didn't stop soon the thin thread of control he still possessed was going to snap like a freaking twig!

But the last thing he wanted was for her to stop. He reached out, fisting her hair in his hand as she picked up pace. Her head bobbed up and down, her lips easing on the down stroke, tightening and sucking

on the up stroke, milking him with her mouth. He felt her hand slither up his inner thigh and drew in a breath when she cupped his balls in her palm. She caressed them, rolled them around in her hand as she continued her savage feast on his cock.

One hand still in her hair, he gripped the sheet beside him as the pressure mounted in his cock. His balls tightened and he knew he wouldn't be able to hold back much longer.

"Alicia." He hissed her name, hoping she heard the warning in his tone. "Baby." He tried again but when she didn't stop this time he let go, spurting his seed into her mouth and down her throat. Still, she didn't stop. She sucked, swallowed, drinking him dry. Gently, when she was sure she had it all she let his cock slide from her mouth.

Derek's eyes fluttered open, focused slowly on the vision that just gave him the blowjob of his life. She sat back on her legs at his waist, her lips red and moist, and a satisfied smile brightening her face. He wanted to sit up, hug her to him but couldn't gather the strength to move that much. Instead, he held out his arm.

She came to him, curling up at his side as she had been before she began the acts that robbed him of his strength, his seed, and his ability to think!

He looked down at her, touched his lips to her forehead. "That was amazing."

Her arm slid over his chest, her head snuggling in the pit of his arm, and he felt a tear trickle down his side.

* * * *

Alicia awoke in the wee hours of the morning still cuddled against Derek, her arm draped across his chest, one leg tangled over his. She inhaled, breathing in his innate scent, the smell of her on him, the sweet mixture of it all as they mingled in the air. Careful not to wake him, she tilted her head back and watched him as he slept. He looked so peaceful, so comfortable and so unbelievably gorgeous. Waking

with him this way was surrealistic. Softly, she tangled her fingers in his chest hair, felt the smooth steady beat of his heart on her palm.

He grunted, his arm tightening possessively around her, pulling her closer still. She wondered if he realized how perfectly their bodies fit together. Her curves to his angles, they seemed to have been made for one another. But that was just her heart talking, she knew. She wanted him to feel the same, wished he could want her as badly in and out of bed as she did him. Yet she knew in her heart of hearts that would never be. She was hoping for a fairytale ending. But her relationship with Derek was not a love story promising the happily ever after. No. The only promise that lay between them was the fact in a few days he would be gone from her life.

He stirred again, his side brushing against her breast. Her nipple tightened in automatic response. The sun would be up soon and she had no way of knowing what the new day might bring. Determined to make the best of her time with this man, she kissed the side of his neck, caressed the curls on his chest. In sleep, his hand found the side of her breast, his fingers skimming along its curve.

Boldly, she began to nibble her way up the smooth plane of his neck, sucked his earlobe between her lips. Her hand moved lower until she found his dick under the covers. She held it, fondled it, and relished the feel of it growing hard in her hand.

His eyes opened slowly, foggy from sleep as he turned his head to look at her. She watched the fog clear and the chocolate color behind it darken with lust.

“What a way to wake up.” His voice was groggy but full of arousal. “Ms. Addison, I’m beginning to think you’re addicted to sex.”

Only with you. “If you would rather I let you go back to sleep...” She tightened her fingers around his now fully erect cock and smiled mischievously. His only response was to hand her a condom off the bedside table.

Laughing, she sat up, removed the rubber from the package, and sheathed his dick. He caught her as she lay down, pushing her on her

back as he turned on his side. Keeping his gaze locked with hers, he lifted her leg and thrust into her without warning.

The first shock of pleasure rocked her but she forced her eyes to stay open, to look at him. Her pussy was wet but not enough to make the entrance of his thick cock easy. She felt the heat, the friction of his thrust and her juices rushed around him.

The pace he set was far from slow and gentle this time. He pushed into her, penetrating her deeper than she thought possible, in a fast paced beat matching that of the music he was known for. God, she loved it! He pounded into her, finding every erogenous spot inside her until she burst and was nearly unable to hold back the accompanying scream. Then with one final thrust he came with her.

Alicia finally allowed her eyes to close. He slid out of her and she felt the bed move slightly as he removed the condom and tossed it to the floor. He pulled her to him and held her tightly until their breathing slowed. After a moment, she felt his finger slide under her chin, tugging her face up to his and she opened her eyes.

“Did I hurt you?” His eyes searched hers, his voice full of concern.

“Hurt me?” She stifled a laugh. “Heavens no! That was very...stimulating.”

He smiled, catching the humor in her choice of words. “Stimulating, huh?” He smoothed a fingertip down the side of her face. His smile disappeared as he stared at her. “I can't seem to get enough of you.”

His whispered words gripped like a vice on her heart. “Good,” she finally managed though the single word sounded a bit shaky to her own ears. “Because I haven't had enough of you.”

He smiled again but his body was still stiff with tension around her. “In that case, give me a while to regroup and we'll see if we can satisfy this hunger.”

Alicia was utterly certain her hunger for him could never be completely satisfied.

* * * *

“Are you letting me win?” Alicia planted her fists on her trim hips and glared at Derek from down the court.

Derek's fingers tightened on his tennis racket and he swallowed a laugh. How could anyone look so cute and sexy as hell at the same time? He was sure her expression was meant to be scolding but to him it looked like that of a frustrated two-year-old. “Baby, if I was letting you win I wouldn't feel so damn bad about losing.”

He tossed the tennis ball in the air and hit it. The ball sailed perfectly down the court several arms lengths from an un-expecting Alicia. She hadn't been ready for his serve and he hadn't given her any warning. She lunged for the ball, her racket outstretched, but missed it by mere inches.

“Hey, you cheated!” Her disbelieving shriek had him chuckling. She caught the ball and turned to him, a smile tugging her luscious lips. The need to hold her, touch her, taste her, stirred inside him. She wore only a purple bikini and the necklace he gave her on her birthday. The skimpy bikini top barely concealed her plump, full breasts but it was still too much material for his taste. He wanted his hands on her...now!

“You're right. We won't count that one. It's your serve.”

“Yes, we will count it.” She bounced the ball, caught it and held it up, prepared to send the ball barreling down the court. “Game point.”

Her return serve would have been an easy hit had she not mesmerized him. The ball hit the court a racket length from him and rolled away.

“You didn't even try for that one.” She spun her racket in her hand as she walked to him.

Her hips swayed. Her tits bounced ever so slightly and his penis jumped to attention. When she reached him, he pulled her hard against his body, loving the way her curves fit to his. “I was

distracted.” He planted a kiss on the tip of her nose.

She rubbed her hips against him, grinding and his cock throbbed from the attention, begging for more. “I’ll say.” She grinned and let her hands fall to his ass, cupped his buttocks and gave them a teasing squeeze.

“Alicia Mallory Addison!” The appalled gasp of the intruder had them leaping away from each other.

“Mother! What are you doing here?” Color rose instantly to Alicia’s cheeks, turning them redder than a fire engine. It would have been unbelievably sexy if her word hadn’t penetrated the sexual throb collecting in both his heads—the one on his shoulders and between his legs.

So this was the elder Mrs. Addison. He would have never guessed. A quick assessment of both women revealed absolutely no similarity between mother and daughter. While Alicia’s hair was an enticing dark brown, her mother’s was obviously bleach blond. Alicia was fair skinned where her mother was deeply tanned. Alicia’s eyes were the color of the bluest sky and always friendly. Her mother’s were gray and cold and currently narrowed suspiciously on him.

Derek held his tennis racket in front of him, hoping the stance appeared polite while, at the same time, hiding the massive erection he had for this woman’s daughter. *What a way to make a great first impression.*

“I came by to invite you to dinner this evening.” The woman’s cold eyes swept over Derek disapprovingly. He suppressed a shudder. This was one woman who was confident her shit didn’t stink. Her hard gaze turned to Alicia. “Shouldn’t you be inside taking care of business?”

“There isn’t any business to take care of at the moment, Mom.” Alicia spoke casually, tucking her hair behind one ear.

“Don’t you have guests that need attention?” Her mother scowled, her tone sharp and stabbing. “I doubt your sister left this place in your hands for you to spend your time playing and neglecting her guests.”

"I'm not neglecting anyone, mother." Casual tone gone, Alicia laced the words with so much kindness Derek wanted to squirm. "Derek." She turned to him but didn't meet his gaze. "This is my mother, Margaret Addison. Mother, this is Derek Smith."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." Derek wiped his sweaty palm on his shorts before extending it for a polite handshake.

Margaret hesitated, shuffled her handbag, and stared at his hand as though it were a cactus ready to sink its thorns in her skin. When she finally shook his hand, her touch was light and quick, her fingers never closing around his.

"Mr. Smith is a guest at Addison House. At the moment, he is the only guest. We were just enjoying a game of tennis. Derek needed a partner and, since I have a passion for the game, I offered to play."

"From what I saw, tennis isn't the only thing you've offered to play."

"Mother!" Alicia gasped, obviously mortified.

"Since you have no other guests staying here you should have no problem coming to the house for dinner tonight. Bring Mr. Smith," she nearly spat his name, "with you if you like. We will expect to see you promptly at eight." Before either of them could utter a word, Margaret spun on her heel and was gone.

Alicia turned to Derek and he saw her struggling for something to say but coming up empty. She was embarrassed, humiliated and unsure and, much to his surprise, seeing those emotions in her ripped at his heart.

"Looks like you will have to buy me another suit after all," he said and pulled her back into his arms.

* * * *

"Derek, you really don't have to do this." Alicia hesitated as he opened the passenger door to his truck for her and waited for her to climb in.

"I know." He leaned in, kissed her quickly then shut the door, walked around the front of the truck and slid in beside her.

"My parents... Well, my mother, she's not an easy woman."

Derek started the engine then turned his head to look at her. Though it was dark out, she could see him clearly in the green glow of the dashboard lights that mixed with the pale white light from the porch. "I got that impression this afternoon." He put the truck in gear. "I take the main road into town?"

He was determined to do this and nothing she said seemed to have the least bit of effect on him. "Yes." Resigned, she settled more comfortably in the seat. Uneasiness rocked her nerves. Not from being in an enclosed space with the man of her dreams. No, she was getting use to being with Derek in close quarters—too comfortable with it actually. But taking him to her parent's house for dinner, knowing how her mother would act... Heaven help her.

They rode in silence broken only by the occasional word as Alicia directed him through the city to her parent's home. When they drove through the gated entrance of the secure subdivision he gave a low, appreciative whistle. "Nice neighborhood."

"It's okay if you like the over elaborate," Alicia said dryly. "Take a right here." She pointed through the windshield.

"And you don't?" he asked as he made the turn.

"I like a house I can live in, a place that feels like home. You can't often have both, the elaborate and the homey feel. Star accomplished it pretty well with Addison House but it's a bed and breakfast designed for the short stay. I would suffocate if I actually had to *live* there."

"Where *do* you live?" Derek shot her a quick questioning glance.

"I have a little yellow cottage on Autumn Street. That's my parent's house." She pointed again and he pulled into the driveway, parking behind her father's Rolls.

"I would like to see it some time, your cottage."

Her heart skipped a beat but before she could say anything he was

climbing out of the truck and walking to her side. Suddenly the decorating choices she so loved in her cottage weren't such a good idea after all. She couldn't take him to her house. His face was literally everywhere!

* * * *

Dinner was the tension-filled event Alicia expected. Her mother hardly spoke, and when she did it was about William Templeton of all people! What a wonderful job he was doing at solving the problems at the Vegas casino and hotel, how sad he seemed since Alicia broke their engagement. Each time his name came up, Alicia simply closed her eyes and took many deep-calming breaths. When she opened her eyes, she would see her father looking at her from his seat at the head of the table, his own eyes full of compassion and understanding. She hadn't talked with her father since her pre-birthday dinner and was relieved to discover he at least wasn't angry with her.

Jonathon Addison did his best to salvage the dinner and make Derek feel welcome. They talked mostly of business, the conversation leaning toward the hotels and casinos the Addison family owned and the operations of each. When questioned about his own profession, Derek explained he was in the music business, the owner of a newly formed recording label and looking for new bands to sign. It was a partial truth. Derek and Garrett started their own label on the side almost a year ago. It was something Alicia noticed was becoming a common act among musicians.

"Jonathon, why don't you take Mr. Smith into the parlor for a drink?" Margaret suggested after dinner. "Alicia and I will stay here and have coffee."

Jonathon looked to his daughter with apology and sympathy in his eyes but rose from the table and led Derek to the parlor across the hall. Alicia wanted to scream, to run after them as they disappeared from the room. But she fought the urge. Determination rising, she

would face off with her mother tonight if that's what Margaret had in mind. When her mother turned to her with a cold and unyielding expression, Alicia knew that was exactly what her mother had in mind.

“Exactly what is it you are trying to prove Alicia?”

* * * *

“My daughter isn't too pleased that I left her alone with her mother,” Jonathon commented as he closed the parlor door. He walked to a bar across the room. “What's your preference son?”

“Crown if you have it, sir.” Derek answered.

“Straight up?”

“That's fine.”

“However, my wife would have my dick in a vice grip for a week if I hadn't left the two of them alone,” Jonathon continued. He poured a double shot of Crown for Derek and a scotch for himself. “Since I have to live with my wife...” He left the sentence hanging, turning to Derek with a sly grin.

Derek stepped to the man and took the glass offered to him. “You chose the lesser of the two evils. Smart man.” He tilted his glass in a complimented toast.

“A man is never smart when dealing with women, son, but we try. Have a seat.”

Derek chuckled as he sat on the buttery leather sofa. Jonathon sat adjacent to him in a matching recliner. They studied one another for a brief moment. The atmosphere held far less tension than what they suffered through during dinner and Derek was grateful. He found he liked Jonathon Addison. He was a stocky, well-groomed man with balding dark hair the color of Alicia's and eyes that mirrored his daughter's as well. He exuded power and money but not so much so Derek felt uncomfortable in the man's presence.

“My wife is angry with Alicia.” Jonathon's voice was deep, kind,

conversational. "I'm sure you picked up on that at dinner if you weren't already aware."

"Because Alicia broke her engagement." Derek sipped his drink. He felt the tension in his muscles instantly begin to relax.

"For starters." The older man nodded. "I believe Margaret planned to get Alicia over here tonight and push her into changing her mind."

"And my being here complicated her plans."

Jonathon nodded thoughtfully. "It did, yes. But something tells me your presence is a good thing for Alicia. My wife can be a very persuasive woman in her way. So can my daughter when she isn't trying to please her mother. Over the last year or so I have watched Alicia break away from that. Whether she's conscious of it or not, I don't know. What I do know is it's a good thing. Alicia is making her own decisions with little regard of the consequences from her mother."

"You seem pleased Alicia isn't marrying William Templeton."

"William is a good man, a smart man. He wouldn't be in control at my company if I didn't think so. But being good for my business and being good for my daughter are two different things entirely. I want the best for my daughter and so does Margaret. The problem is Margaret has it in her head the best life for Alicia is one like her own." Jonathon stood, paced the carpet as he spoke. "Margaret has never worked a day in her life. Her only aspiration was to marry rich and live the high life. She did so by marrying me."

Derek leaned forward, rested his forearms on his thighs and held his glass with both hands in front of him as he listened attentively.

"I'm not saying my wife doesn't love me," Jonathon continued. "She does and I love her orneriness and all." Both men chuckled. "But I've known from the start she married me for my money above all else and I accepted that. Star married Paul Harrington for the same reason. Sure, she is a businesswoman as well but that bed and breakfast of hers is a hobby of sorts more than it is a job. Her prices are a bit steep but she makes just enough off the business to cover the

expenses. It's Paul's money that supports them. Then there's Alicia..." He moved to the bar to refill his glass.

When he offered Derek a refill he declined. "I'm driving."

"Yes, that's right." Jonathon leaned an elbow against the bar. "Alicia is my black sheep," He grinned and Derek didn't miss the pride in the man's eyes. "She will never marry for money. It isn't that important to her. She wants more out of life. She feels she has enough money of her own and apparently she does for the lifestyle she chooses to lead. She has money in the bank. Both of my daughters were given a substantial amount when they reached the age of twenty-one and at thirty-five they will get more. Star used hers to start her bed and breakfast but Alicia rarely touches hers. She lives on the money she makes from her books. You do know she's an author?"

"Yes and she's a good one." Derek nodded. "I just finished reading one of her books."

Jonathon returned to the recliner and sat. "Margaret told me how she found you and my daughter this afternoon."

The abrupt change in subject had Derek sitting up straight. "Yes, sir," he said cautiously.

"You are a guest at Addison House. You've told me you live in Philadelphia and will be returning there in a few days. As a businessman myself I can understand. As a father, I feel I have to ask. What are your plans where my daughter is concerned?"

Derek feared the question would come up at some point during the night. As he dressed for the dinner he thought of what his response might be and came up with nothing. Now, with the question laid out on the table, he still didn't have an answer. "Mr. Addison..."

"Jonathon."

"Jonathon," Derek corrected and shifted on the sofa. "It's honestly hard to say at this point. Alicia is a very beautiful and intriguing woman but..."

"Are you in love with her?" Jonathon asked bluntly.

Derek's heart stopped. He knew his expression betrayed him.

"I've done the math, son. I know the two of you just met. But in my experience, time doesn't factor when love is involved. Margaret and I met, I fell in love with her and we were married in less than three months. We may not have the kind of marriage that would make most happy but it works for us and we have been married now for nearly forty years. So, I ask again, are you in love with my daughter?"

"No sir," Derek answered honestly. He wasn't. He couldn't be. The tug in his chest that was becoming so familiar was not a product of love. "I care for her," he admitted. "I enjoy the time we spend together." *And she's phenomenal in bed.*

"Do you intend to continue your relationship with her in a long distance capacity of sorts when you return home?"

"I would like to," Derek said and hoped it wasn't a lie.

Jonathon accepted the answer though Derek couldn't tell if the man actually believed him or simply decided to concede. "She cares for you," he said after a moment's pause. "I see it in the way she looks at you. Alicia is tough in many ways but she's also very delicate. Be careful with her son."

It was said as more of a request than a warning or threat and Derek took it as such. He thought of the tear he brushed from her face, the other he felt trickle down his side, the softness that came to her eyes when she looked at him, and felt that all too familiar tug yet again.

Chapter Seven

Alicia held tight to Derek's hand as he helped her from the truck and over the cement barrier separating sand from street. She had taken off her shoes, leaving them in the floorboard of the truck, and the sand tickled as it seeped between her toes. Though it was warm out, a gentle breeze rippled the air. A full moon shone brightly from high in the sky and she thought of Diana. Her friend would be admiring that moon tonight, performing one of her rituals in observation and respect.

They walked hand in hand in silence to the water's edge. The beach was deserted. The only sounds that of the small waves pounding against the shore. Slowly, they began walking side by side over the squishy dampened sand.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Derek gave her hand a slight squeeze.

"By it I assume you mean my parents." Alicia gazed out over the water.

"Your mother. I'm sorry I left you alone with her."

Alicia's laugh held only a glint of humor. "My father didn't give you much choice." She looked at him then, curiosity getting the best of her. "What did the two of you talk about for so long anyway?"

"Business, the house, your mother, you." He let go of her hand and slid his arm around her waist.

"I was afraid of that." Alicia sighed. Terrified, if the truth were known. How much had her father told him?

"He likes what he's seeing in you. The defiance, so to speak, against your mother's wishes. I think he's pleased that you chose not

to marry William.”

“Really?” Alicia couldn't hide her surprise. “I thought he liked William.”

“He does. But, in your father's own words, what makes a man good for his business isn't exactly the same as what makes a man good for his baby girl.”

“At least I know I have one parent that doesn't want to skin me alive.”

“Your mother is being that difficult?”

“The way she acted during dinner was mild compared to her behavior once we were alone if that gives you any indication.”

“I'm sorry, baby.” Derek stopped walking and pulled her into his arms. “I shouldn't have left you alone with her.”

“She's my mother.” Alicia shrugged. “And it's not like you will always be there.” She gazed into his eyes and even in the dim moonlight she saw the conflict of emotions that swept through their brown depths.

“No,” he said slowly. “I can't. But I realized something tonight.” He cupped the side of her face in his hand. His voice grew husky. “I don't know what's happening between us, Alicia, but I know I don't want it to end when I leave.”

Tears blurred her vision and she didn't try to blink them away. With that one sentence, he deprived her of the strength to fight them, to keep the lid on the bottle of emotions that weighted her insides. She saw the truth of his words in his eyes and it tore at her heart.

He brushed away a tear with his thumb as it slid down her cheek. “I'm not making any promises baby. Nor am I asking for any. Long distance relationships are a bitch.”

But a long distance relationship is the only kind your lifestyle will allow. She swallowed. “I'm willing to try if you are.”

He answered with miniscule nod and a kiss that made the stars explode in the sky. His tongue caressed hers, seduced hers, and she melted into him. His arm tightened around her waist, his other hand

delved into her hair. He pulled her so close to him they were nearly as one and she felt the hardness of his erection against her. She wanted to feel that powerful rod inside her, needed to join with him now more than ever before.

“Take me home, Derek,” she whispered pleadingly against his lips. “Make love to me.”

He pulled away slightly and looked around. Without a word, he quickly dragged her under a nearby pier. In the darkest of shadows, he pushed her against one of the large wooden supports. “I can't wait until I get you home.” His voice was tight with sexual need.

Before she could think, before the openness of their location could register, he freed his cock from his pants and lifted her skirt. In the next breath, his hands were on the back of her thighs, spreading her legs and lifting her. Then he was inside her and the force of his thrust had her crying out his name.

“Don't lean against the post too much,” he said on a straggled breath. “There are splinters. Hold on to me baby.”

And she did. With nothing but his broad shoulders for leverage, he was in complete control. She locked her ankles around his back. Gripping her buttocks, he lifted her, withdrawing almost completely before he loosened his grip and left her fall, slamming his cock inside her in long, delicious thrusts. He repeated the movement again and again until she thought she might die from the pleasure.

“Alicia,” he whispered roughly.

She let her head fall back as his thrusts pushed her closer to the edge. When she went over, the force of the orgasm shook her. With a low moan that came from deep in his throat, Derek fell with her. She felt the heat of his seed shoot up into her. His hands shook under her ass and she feared he might drop her. Slowly, gently, he pulled out and stood her before him on her shaky legs. She wobbled.

“Can you stand on your own?” He chuckled, still holding onto her.

“I think so.” She pulled down her skirt and felt the gooey mixture

of their juices roll down her inner thigh. He hadn't used a condom. Her head snapped up to look at him, disbelief coursing through her in icy blue waves. She couldn't believe he forgot.

He stepped back an inch and was zipping his fly but realized it about the same time she did. His head jerked up and their gazes locked. A fear she never before saw anywhere flooded his face and he turned deathly pale.

He closed his eyes, jammed a hand over his head. "Shit." The word was so soft it was barely audible.

"It's okay, Derek." Alicia ran a comforting hand down his muscular bicep. "I'm on birth control and I'm clean."

He opened his eyes and the relief in them was unmistakable. "I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry." He pulled her to him again, one hand around her waist, the other cupping the side of her face. "I got carried away. I get tested regularly. I'm clean too. I didn't think. Geezus, Alicia, few women have ever made me lose control like you do."

"How many women have you been with?" The question was out of her mouth before she could stop it.

He glanced away, looked back again. "Let's just say I've been with my fair share. I get tested regularly," he added quickly. "I'm clean."

"So am I." She kissed him, effectively ending the conversation.

* * * *

"Mind if I join you?"

Alicia felt his hands on her before she heard his question. She stood with her eyes closed under the steady stream of water spewing from the showerhead. She took a small step forward and opened her eyes. "Looks like you already have."

His hands skimmed down her slick front moving teasingly over her breasts. "I woke up and you weren't there."

"I have some errands to run today, some things to do for Addison House." Her arms lifted to find their place around his neck. "I thought

I would get an early start. Hopefully I can get through by noon.”

“And exactly what did you have in mind for the rest of your day?”

He nuzzled her neck, lips brushing, tongue teasing.

Alicia let her head fall back, exposing more skin. “I thought I would spend it with you,” she managed on a ragged breath.

“Good plan.” He pulled her hips into his and she felt the fierceness of his morning erection between them.

“Derek.” His name hissed from her lips as his teeth skimmed her collarbone.

“Hmm?”

“There are some things we need to talk about. Something I need to tell you.” But it was getting increasingly difficult to think much less talk. His tender kisses, his gentle touches were driving her hormones wild.

“Want to know what my plans are for today?” He bent slightly, drew one nipple between his lips.

“Oh God!” He didn't suck, didn't bite. He simply grazed the pebbled surface of her nipple over and over again with his soft moist lips and the tantalizing contact made her body beg for more.

“I'm going to make love to you now. Then I'm going to think about you all day until you return to me at which time I'm going to make love to you again.” He caught her nipple between his teeth and bit it lightly. “And again.” He bit her a little harder. “And again.” He filled his mouth with her breast and sucked until she writhed against him, lightning bolts of pleasure striking from her breast to her pussy.

It was as if an electric current existed there, the sensations surging that thin line. Her pussy ached, her juices pooled, and her body begged for release.

“Then we can talk.” He straightened before her, his eyes dark and glassy, his expression as seductive as his voice. Slowly, he turned her until she faced the back wall of the shower and guided her hands to rest flat on the cool tiles. He caressed her sides, her back, and her buttocks. One finger sliding between her cheeks and lightly down the

crack of her ass.

Alicia arched her back and spread her legs wanting to feel more. His finger found her anus and lightly traced its rim. She sucked in a breath. Her pussy clenched in a need for attention of its own. He obliged but only for an instant that merely succeeded in intensifying its need. His finger delved in her sopping channel, capturing a bit of her wetness before returning to her other much tighter hole. Again, he rubbed its rim, lubricating it with her juices then slowly, eased his finger inside her.

She gasped from the combination of pleasure and pain the penetration provided. Between her legs, she felt his dick move closer to the opening of her pussy as his finger eased a little deeper inside her ass. The invasion of her most secret place heightened her awareness of the building orgasm, of the emptiness of her pussy.

“Derek please,” she said on a strangled cry.

“Please what baby?” He pushed his finger even deeper. When she didn't answer he asked, “What is it you want Alicia? Tell me.”

“Fuck me!” She growled the words and, thank you sweet baby Jesus, he drove his dick into her pussy. He continued to finger her ass as he pounded his cock inside her. Her hands braced on the wall, she pushed her lower body into him driving him deeper in both places until she cried out from the sheer pleasure, the pain, and finally the explosive orgasm that shattered from her.

He withdrew the finger, grasped her hips in his hands and continued to thrust hard and deep inside her channel. She felt herself climbing the cliff again and didn't try to stop it. He held back until she came again this time allowing himself the release. They grunted and moaned, their bodies exploding as one.

* * * *

Alicia grabbed a soda from the fridge and settled in her chair at her desk. She completed her morning tasks for Addison House with

an hour to spare and decided to swing by her cottage to check on things before returning to the B and B. She signed onto the Internet and checked her morning e-mails, then clicked the link in her favorite's box that opened the Façade message board. Jumping first to the bottom of the screen, she did a quick scan for Derek's name. He wasn't on the board right now.

As she scrolled through the posts in the different forums, she wondered what he was doing. Was he in his room at Addison House thinking of her as he said he would be?

With a skilled hand, she moved the mouse, clicked, opening the forum designated for announcements. Realization dawned as she read the latest post by the forum monitor. The band had scheduled a short list of dates for the coming month. A few shows they would perform to keep them in the public eye. None of them were in St. Petersburg or even in Florida.

Disappointment iced through her veins. She wanted to see the band play live again so badly but they were sticking close to home. At least that explained why Derek wasn't able to extend his vacation. He had to return home to prepare for the concerts.

Her spirits lifted when she realized she could still see them. After tonight, her secret would be out. She would tell Derek she knew who he really was and then she could fly to one of the scheduled venues next month, see him and attend the concert. He would like that, she decided. After all, hadn't he told her just last night he didn't want their relationship to end when he left?

She sank back in her chair and stared at one of the many posters of him on the wall beside her desk. She still couldn't believe it. He wanted to continue seeing her. She had attempted to prepare herself for when he left, for returning to a life where he only existed for her on CDs, posters and memory. Now she wouldn't have to and she found herself unable to control her delight.

With Façade music playing through the living room, she leaped up and did a bootie dance. A knock at the front door had her stopping

mid-boogie. Switching off the stereo on her way to the door, she peered through the peephole, and her heart hit the floor. Derek stood on her front porch gazing around as he waited for her to open the door.

“Oh shit!” She covered her heart with her hand, felt the rapid beating against her palm. What should she do? She couldn't pretend not to be home. He would know she was there. Her car was parked in the driveway, for Pete's sake.

She spun around, her gaze frantically scanning the room. No way could she let him in here. She would have to be like Barbara Eden in *I Dream of Jeannie* to make all evidence of Façade disappear from her living room.

Calm. She had to remain calm. *Okay, get your purse. Pretend you were just leaving.* She could open the door only enough to squeeze out and he would be none the wiser.

He knocked again, louder and more insistent. She jumped on her way to her desk for her purse. Snatching it up, she yanked it on her shoulder, walked back to the door. Several deep breaths later, she eased the door open and feigned surprise. “Derek!”

“Hi beautiful.” His smile could have knocked her socks off if she'd been wearing any.

“What are you doing here?” He stood to close, blocking her path.

Alicia gripped the doorknob, pulling it closer until she was squeezed between it and the doorframe. Keep him talking. Distract him and then slip out. If she could manage that, perhaps keep him looking at her, maybe she could get through this.

“I was out driving, found the street.” He shrugged. “You told me what street you live on last night. I thought I would cruise by, see your house. When I saw your car, I decided to stop.”

Dammit! Why did she tell him the name of the street? “I was just leaving.” Back up. Please back up. Her thoughts bordered hysteria as she mentally coaxed him to move out of her way.

“Can I come in first? I would like to see—” His stopped, his glare

transfixed on the inch of space between her head and the doorframe.

“Derek...” She closed her eyes, sighed. Fear swirled with the dread in her veins. Her pulse roared in her ears. Slowly, she opened her eyes. The anger distorting his gorgeous features was indescribable. His cold gaze locked with hers, he placed a hand on the door, pushed it open. The knob was winched from her grasp as it swung open. Without a word, he stepped around her and entered the house. Silently praying for some divine miracle or attitude and words, she closed the door, turned.

He stopped in the center of the room. Though his back was to her, she saw the tension in the squared frame of his shoulders, the shock in the rigid stance. Only his head moved as his gaze swept the room, taking in the posters, most of them of him and his band mates. When he finally turned to look at her, his chocolate eyes swirled with more emotions than she could separate, his expression one she'd never seen before and hoped to never see again.

“Derek, let me...”

“You know.” He didn't yell. The ghostly tone to his voice was far worse than any scream. “You've known all along.”

Alicia's eyes filled. God, the disbelief, the shock, and the pain in those four little words and she caused it. “That's what I planned to tell you tonight. That's why I said we needed to talk.”

“Tonight Alicia.” He raked a hand over his face then let it fall to his side. “What about last night and the night before that? What about the night we fucking met?”

She started to shake. Not from fear he would physically harm her. He would never do that. But she'd never seen him angry. And he was angry. Every other emotion she saw in his expression had given way to the sheer and complete fury. She thought he'd been pissed the day he found out about William. That had been nothing like this.

“We've been together nearly every breath for the last week and you never once attempted to tell me.” He turned his back on her, paced away, stomped back, and raked a hand over his head.

"I was scared to tell you Derek," she admitted quietly. "When you showed up, realized why you hadn't registered under your own name, I knew you didn't want anyone to know who you were. I thought you would leave if you knew that I knew. Then you came onto me and I wanted you so bad, I wanted to be with you so bad, and I wanted you to stay. I *needed* you to stay."

"And what did you think would happen when I did leave? You knew I couldn't stay here forever."

"I didn't know what would happen." Defeated, she shook her head, shrugged. "But I figured you would simply go back to your life and forget me."

"Well, it looks like you figured right. Goodbye, Alicia."

She grabbed his arm as he walked by on his way to the door. "Derek, wait! Let's talk about this. Can't we sit down, talk, and find a way to work through this?"

He glanced down at her hand on his forearm, looked back at her and she thought she saw a glimmer of tears in his chocolate brown eyes. "The time when that would have been possible passed days ago." He jerked his arm away.

"Derek, I love you." Oh God. Had she really said that? Yes, and it was the truth. She loved him with every ounce of her being.

He wrenched the door open, turned and the look in his eyes was one that would haunt her every nightmare. "Woman, you don't even know what love is." Then he was gone.

* * * *

The sun was setting by the time Alicia was able to pull herself together enough to leave her cottage. It had been hours since Derek stormed from the house, but his parting words still echoed in her mind.

You don't even know what love is.

He'd been partially right, she mused as she drove to Addison

House. Until him she hadn't know true love. But she did now. And she knew pain. Oh God, did she know pain. She had to make him see that. Somehow she had to make him listen to her and understand.

His truck wasn't in the driveway when she pulled in at the B and B. The thought of him driving, even if to blow off steam, did nothing to calm her tattered nerves. He'd been so angry, so hurt. Tears welled as the look he gave her just before walking out the door flashed through her memory. It was very likely he would wait to return, stay away until he thought she would be asleep. But she wasn't going to let him avoid her. She had a master key to his suite and she would wait there until he returned.

It was a great plan, practically fool-proof plan, until she walked into the suite to find it not only empty of Derek but his belongings as well. The only thing left was a short, quickly scribbled note instructing all charges to be made to the credit card number he gave upon reservation.

He was gone, she realized and balled the note in her fist, held it to her chest. Gone from the room, from Addison House, from her life.

She crumbled onto the bed where they slept together, held each other, made love to each other and let the tears come. She'd had it all, her every dream came true, and she destroyed it with her lies.

Chapter Eight

“Alicia, look at this one.” Diana's voice was overly cheerful as she pointed to a painting among several others of similar style and texture in the art gallery.

“It's very...” Pretty, she started to say as she had every other painting and sculpture Diana pointed out in the last hour but the word got stuck somewhere in her throat. Unlike every other painting and sculpture, this one smacked her right across the face and the heart. Tears burned her eyes as she took in the dark scene, the blackness of the sky broken only by a full gray moon surrounded by twinkling stars. A silhouetted couple stood hand in hand on a beach at the water's edge gazing into that sky. Memories of the night she and Derek had taken a walk on the beach slammed into her mind. The images hurt worse than a physical blow.

She swallowed, attempted to push the visions aside. “Beautiful,” she finished.

“Oh honey.” Diana sighed and turned to her.

“I'm sorry.” She sniffled, folding her arms beneath her breasts, hugging herself as she blinked back tears. If she burst into another crying fit in the middle of the art gallery she would be mortified. “It's just...” Unable to complete the sentence, she let the words trail off.

“It reminds you of Derek.” Diana skimmed a consolatory hand down her arm.

Alicia chuckled dryly, her hand floating up to close around the necklace he gave her. “Everything reminds me of Derek these days.”

Diana shoved her hand in the pockets of the navy blue straight-fitting dress she wore. “Have you heard from him?”

Alicia shook her head. "He won't call. He's back home now, back to his normal life. He'll be on the road again by the end of this week. I'm probably..." She gulped, forcing down the lump in her throat. "I'm probably nothing more than an unpleasant memory to him now."

"I doubt that, sister. I think the man was falling in love with you."

"*Was* being the operative word."

"Feelings like that can't be turned off by the flick of a switch. Have you tried to contact him?"

"I posted a message to him on the board a few days after he left." Alicia sighed, shrugged. "That's the only way I have to reach him. I didn't put anything obvious in it. I didn't want everyone else on the board to know we'd been together for a while. As far as I know he never responded. I haven't looked in a couple of weeks."

"Wouldn't Star have his phone number? She had to get it when he made the reservation at Addison House."

"Tried that. Well, Star tried it for me," Alicia amended. "She's really been great about all of this. She pretended she was just making a follow-up call to be sure he enjoyed his stay but the number he gave was Reese's."

"Really? Sounds like I need to have a talk with your sister." Diana's eyes glinted with mischief.

Alicia smiled wanly. "I could get the number for you."

"No need. I wouldn't call it anyway. The man is just another gorgeous face. Even if there were a chance, he and I would clash like night and day."

"There's always a chance," Alicia whispered. "As long as you don't fuck it up like I did."

"Come on." Diana reached for Alicia's hand, laced their fingers together. "Let's go get some chocolate. I hear they have a new blend of chocolate coffee at the coffee shop. And they have homemade brownies, too. Besides, I need to get out of here before I attempt to buy that painting."

Alicia stole a glance at the canvas. "Who's the artist?"

"I didn't think to look." Diana stepped back to the painting to read the signature scribbled in the bottom corner. "S. Cassidy. Suzanne painted this!"

"I did," a small female voice said from behind them. "It's one of my favorites."

"I can see why." Alicia turned to the woman. "It's beautiful."

Like her voice, Suzanne Cassidy was a small woman, not more than five-foot-four, with a slim size three frame, delicate features and natural golden hair that reached halfway down her back. Though she was younger than Alicia and Diana by three years and ran with different circles in school, they had known one another since grade school.

"I didn't realize you were back in town," Diana said. "Didn't you disappear to Paris for a while?"

"For the summer." Suzanne nodded. "A program offered through the School of Arts at USF."

"Well honey, that school must have really helped you zero in on your talents." Diana sounded impressed. "This painting is incredible! The scene you've captured, the detail, it's breathtaking."

"Thank you." Suzanne's cheeks reddened.

"Is it for sale?" Alicia asked, knowing Diana was dying to but wouldn't.

"It is." Suzanne nodded again. "If you're interested I can speak with Antonio, maybe get you an old friend discount."

Diana moaned. "I don't suppose Antonio has a lay-a-way plan."

Suzanne giggled. It was a girlish sound, cute and so fitting the woman. "It isn't that expensive but I'm sure Antonio will work with you."

Diana looked at the painting, moaned again. "Lead the way sister."

* * * *

Derek tossed his notebook on the smooth black leather surface of the sofa and cursed. He needed to get cracking on the lyrics for the new album but no matter how he tried the words refused to come. He simply couldn't concentrate. Not on anything but Alicia Addison, that was. It had been nearly a month since he last saw her, since he walked out of her house. Still, she haunted him night and day. It wasn't so bad when he was with the guys or out in public, but when he was alone the emptiness returned. The memory of her scent, her touch, her body, refused to offer him a moment of peace.

Maybe he should turn country. Surely he could come up with a notebook full of lyrics then. All those country songs about lost loves and broken hearts, he'd have no problem writing those types of lyrics right now.

Frustrated, he walking to the wrought iron dining room table, settled down in front of his laptop. He actually chuckled at the idea of breaking country lyrics to the other guys in the band. They would have him committed. Speaking of matters of the heart in his lyrics was one thing, he'd done that in every song he wrote. Expressing his personal beliefs over world events, war, religion, poverty, peace, the band and their fans had come to expect that from him. But lost girlfriends and shattered hearts...that route could only earn him a white straight jacket and a padded room.

Heavy metal was a great avenue for channeling anger, some of the bands heaviest songs a product of exactly that. Even with the fury that had yet to leave him, he couldn't find it in himself to take it out in the appropriate words.

Maybe the guys in the band were already on their way to having him committed. Since his return, the going consensus was that he'd lost his mind. He didn't let women affect him the way Alicia Addison had done. He didn't get involved, didn't get attached. He'd done both with Alicia though, and it had been so long since he'd traveled this road he was starting to think he'd forgotten the return route home.

Dammit, why had he let her get so emotionally close? He knew

what would happen, knew the risks. He'd had his heart torn apart so many times there was barely any pieces left. Still, he let her in and look where it got him.

Sighing, he powered up the laptop. Within minutes, he was sifting through the posts in the 'Ask the Band' forum of the message board. He hadn't responded to anything, hadn't read any messages since before his trip to Addison House.

He read several questions, typed in a quick answer then moved on to the next. One of the other guys had answered most of the posts pertaining to the band in general so he focused on those with his name in the subject line. Midway down the second page of posts, one subject line caught his eye. It read: Derek—All Things Magical. Wasn't that the name of the New Age shop where he bought the necklace he gave Alicia for her birthday? He clicked the link and read the message.

Derek,

About a month ago you came into my store and purchased a piece of jewelry.

I got another item in today I think might interest you. Give me a call during business hours and I'll tell you more about it.

The message was signed Diana with a phone number below the name.

Derek leaned back in the chair and cupped his chin as he reread the post. He remembered her. He also remembered her saying she knew Alicia. Were they friends? They had to be, didn't they? He hadn't told the clerk, obviously Diana, who he was. How would she have known to look for him on the Façade board?

She could be a fan, he thought, exploring the possibilities. Maybe she recognized him and simply hadn't said anything. And maybe she was using the bit about the jewelry as a way to get him to call her so she could talk to him about Alicia.

He glanced at the clock in the bottom right of the computer screen. It was just after lunchtime. Deciding there was no time like the present, he stood, walked to the cordless phone on the glass end table. A scrap of paper peeked out from beneath the phone base, Alicia's number where he'd jotted it down after retrieving it shortly upon his return. It taunted him now as it had done since he wrote it. The temptation to dial it instead ate at him. The lingering anger and hurt had him ignoring the hunger as he'd done nearly every time the urge struck him in the past weeks.

He'd thought by now he would be past it all, thought the pain, the anger, the feelings, would fade. But they hadn't. With a heavy sigh, he punched on the phone, walked back to the computer for Diana's number and dialed. Deep down he knew nothing would be resolved until he spoke with Alicia again but he would see what Diana had to say first.

* * * *

Nervousness made Alicia's legs wobble as she stepped off the plane in Atlantic City. She fought to steady herself as she followed the crowd of passengers into the airport and down to the first level baggage claim area. Diana said someone would be waiting for her there. With every click of her hard soled combat boots on the tiled floor, she prayed it would be Derek.

She hadn't spoken to him since he left. He'd called Diana instead. What had Diana told him? Alicia still didn't know everything. Nor did she know what Derek said in return. The end result, however, had been a plane ticket to meet him in Atlantic City where he would be performing a show tonight.

During her flight, she mused over how ironic the entire situation turned out to be. William made plans and appointments for her when they were together without first consulting her and she'd been livid. Yet she hopped on a plane in Atlantic City without a second thought

on a relayed message through Diana from Derek. He made arrangements for her to fly hundreds of miles from home without speaking to her and the thought of being angry at him for doing so never crossed her mind.

She grabbed her lone suitcase as it passed by on the conveyer belt and turned, scanning the thick crowd of people for a familiar face. It was Garrett rather than Derek she spotted a few feet away.

"Alicia?" There was only a hint of skepticism in the question as he approached.

She figured Derek described her to the guitar player. His description combined with the Façade shirt she wore tucked into a pair of black jeans was indication enough of her identity.

Still, she nodded. "Hello Garrett." Her greeting was rewarded with a warm smile. Oddly enough, she found herself more nervous about being in Garrett's company than she would've been had Derek been the one to meet her at the airport. She knew Derek but didn't have a clue what to say to Garrett.

She didn't have to worry at the moment because Garrett simply grabbed her gently by the arm and led her through the airport and outside to a waiting taxi. They were only a couple of miles from the venue before he finally spoke to her again.

"This is an all access pass for tonight's show." He handed her a badge with the band's name and logo printed on it. It hung from a small silver clip. "Fasten it to your shirt or your jeans, somewhere that it will be in view and guard it with your life. The show doesn't start for another three hours but Derek asked that you not try to find him until after the show is over. He has several interviews scheduled and we have a meet and greet with some contest winners about forty-five minutes before the show. It can get pretty chaotic."

"Where do I find him after the show?"

"We'll go back to the dressing room, clean up a bit and then head for the bus. You can wait for him there. The bus area at this venue is open so I'm sure there will be fans lingering after the show to meet us.

As a fan yourself, you know how important our fans are to us. I'm sure Derek will hang out and sign a few autographs. When he's ready he'll give you some kind of signal and the two of you can go on the bus. We're scheduled to leave for the next city around four in the morning so we don't have motel rooms for the night but Reese, Trey and I will stay off the bus for a while to give you and Derek privacy."

His eyes sparkled at his last statement and she knew why he and the other guys suspected she and Derek would need privacy. It wasn't just for talking. God, she hoped it would come to that. If it did, it would mean Derek forgave her.

"Is he still angry?" She hadn't meant to ask but the question was out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Garrett shrugged. "He hasn't said one way or another. The four of us are tight, like brothers, but we don't talk about our personal relationships much. If you want my impression, I would say yes. A part of him is still very angry, but he's hurting too. That's the part that got you here."

Alicia swallowed. An act that was difficult with the tightening in her throat.

"He hasn't said as much," Garrett said again as the taxi pulled into the bus area of the venue. "But I can read the man like a book. I haven't seen him this way in a long time. I don't know what went down between the two of you but whatever it was is eating away at him."

Alicia's vision blurred. If Garrett could see Derek's pain then she hurt him far more than she even realized. To hurt like that meant he had feelings for her far deeper than she knew.

"Don't think about it now." Garrett patted her knee. "Enjoy the show tonight. The seating is general admission inside so you can watch the show from where ever you like, but I expect to see you in the pit right in front of the stage." His smile beamed at her.

Alicia smiled back. "I'll be there and you better throw me a guitar pick for a souvenir."

He did. About halfway through the band's set, Garrett signaled her from the stage and tossed a guitar pick straight to her outstretched hand. She shoved it deep in her pocket so she wouldn't lose it.

The crowd was thick around her sandwiching her against the metal guardrail. When the band kicked into their heaviest songs, huge mosh pits broke out several rows behind her, pushing everyone tighter together. She dripped with sweat, her hair matting to her head. Her clothes stuck to her like glue. She would look horrifying by the end of the show but she didn't care. The instant the band took the stage she pushed all her anxiety over Derek aside, determined to enjoy the show as any Façade fan would.

And she did. She sang along with Derek to every song, knowing the words as well as he. Her arm pumped the air in time with the beat of Reese's drums, she jumped when Derek egged the crowd to jump, and she drooled when he stood before her wiggling his hips clad in tight black leather to the music. It was how she would have acted at a concert had Derek never showed up at Addison House, had they never shared the time alone together.

Derek did the same, giving his fans his all as he did for every performance. It was only when he looked at her from the stage that things were different. When certain lyrics to a song referred to a type of love, pain or sex he looked at her and she looked right back, allowing all her apologies, her needs and her love to show in her gaze.

She knew he at least picked up on the need because she saw the bulge in his leather pants grow from the hardening of his cock. Some of it was due to adrenaline, she knew. The man was doing what he loved. For him, performing for thousands of screaming fans was the greatest rush in the world. Still, she liked to believe some of it was indication of his need for her.

Alicia stayed in her spot for several long moments after the show ended waiting for the thick crowd around her to ease. Instead of fighting her way through and out the front doors, she made her way to the end of the guardrail, flashed her all access pass at the security

guards and went back stage.

She stopped once and asked one of the road crewmembers how to get outside. He directed her to a door at the end of a long hallway. She saw a couple of members of Lo-Pro, an up and coming metal band who had been the opening act for Façade, chatting in the hall outside one of the dressing rooms and thought she heard Derek's voice behind the closed door to another as she made her way outside.

As Garrett predicted, fans had already begun to gather near the tour bus awaiting at least a glimpse of the band. Unsure exactly where Derek would want her to wait, she walked to the bus and stood away from the crowd. One security guard attempted to ask her to move until he saw the pass clipped to her shirt.

Nearly an hour passed before the guys stepped out of the back door of the venue. Her heart tripped as she watched Derek scan the area, his gaze landing on her. His expression blank, he gave her a slight nod and held up one finger telling her to wait.

Over time, the crowd of fans dwindled to about twenty. Derek, Reese, Garrett and Trey made their way to those people and began signing autographs and taking pictures.

Alicia felt a sharp pang of jealousy when the first of the female fans hugged Derek and kissed him on the cheek. She had been like that female fan once, she mused and it had been one of the greatest moments of her life.

It was something she needed to get used to, she knew, other women hugging and sometimes kissing on him. It was, in a way, part of his job. But it was something she could handle, she decided, if Derek chose to forgive her. She had problems with the hugs and occasional kisses as long as she knew in her heart Derek was hers.

Another hour had passed by the time Derek signaled with his gaze for her to get on the bus. She heard him saying goodbye as she pulled open the tour bus door and stepped inside. Moments later, he stepped in behind her and closed the door, cutting off the noise from outside.

As tour busses went, it was large and fairly spacious. Alicia

stopped in a narrow aisle between two bench seats and looked toward the back of the bus. She saw two sets of twin-size bunks, a door that presumably led to a bathroom, and a nice size lounge area in the back.

She thought fleetingly of posts Derek made on the board in reference to that lounge and famous women he would like to have his way with back there. The comments had been made in fun in response to sexual questions posted by fans and made her laugh.

His shoulder brushed hers as he walked by to a short bar by a small refrigerator at the end of one of the bench seats. The slight contact had her entire body screaming for more. He fixed two glasses of Crown, gave one to her as he moved back, stopping a complete arm's length away.

She wanted to close that distance between them. She wanted to throw her arms around his neck, press her body to his, and apologize until her voice became raw and all anger and pain in his heart vanished. She wanted to do so much in that moment but allowed herself to do none of it. He brought her here. It was best to let him make the first move.

"It looks like you enjoyed the show." His gaze raked down the length of her, igniting fires only he had ever managed to build in her core, even as a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

The flames licked the inside of her aching channel, the sound of his voice sparking flashes of current through every pulse point from her head to her toes. She chuckled, the sound full of nerves and uncertainty. "I probably look like hell." She attempted to run her fingers through her matted hair. Tangles stopped her.

"No." His eyes softened as did his voice. "You look like a fan that had a great time at a concert." He took a small step toward her. "A very beautiful, very sexy, very *hot* fan."

"Hold me, Derek. Please hold me." She didn't realize she said the words until he nodded and opened his arms for her.

Though she was only a couple of steps away, she ran into his arms. The Crown in her glass swished over the rim and run down her

hand but she didn't care. His arms closed around her waist. She buried her face in his shoulder as unshed tears spilled over before she could stop them.

She gave up the fight and let the tears come as he held her close and tight. He smelled of sweat, cologne, of sheer maleness and *oh God* he felt so good. Her body shook from her sobs and she felt his hand stroke the back of her head.

"Shh," he whispered, "don't cry baby."

She hiccupped, trying to bring her tears under control. She was too overcome by emotion to be embarrassed. Several heartbeats passed before her sobs subsided. Finally, she took a deep breath and raised her head to look at him. Tears glistened in his eyes and she brushed a hand down his smoothly shaven cheek.

"I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

She closed her eyes as she ingested his words, the hoarse tone in which he said them. "I'm so sorry," she choked.

"I know, so am I." He gently stroked her back with the palm of his hand.

She opened her eyes and glared at him in confusion. "But you have nothing to be sorry for."

"We were both wrong, Alicia. I realized that over the last month. Yes, you hid secrets from me but I was hiding one of my own. I could have told you who I was, that my last name is Kadin and not Smith that I'm a rock star, but I didn't. I knew that night on the beach when I realized I didn't want what was happening between us to end I had to tell you the truth. Still, I said nothing."

"Can we," she gulped, afraid to finish the question, "try again?"

"I want to."

His words swept through her in the greatest wave of relief she ever knew. She could have it all back and she would die before she fucked it up again.

"But can you handle it, Alicia?" Even as he asked the question, he

was walking her to the lounge. "Ours wouldn't be a normal long distance relationship, baby. Your life is in Florida, mine is in Philadelphia and on the road. And you know as soon as we're through recording the new CD we'll be launching another major world tour."

She nodded, continuing to allow him to pull her to the back of the bus until he stopped by a large sofa in the lounge. "I can handle it," she said with complete conviction. They pulled off one another's shirts before she spoke again. They set down their drinks on the way to the back and, with both hands now free, she splayed them flat on his broad chest and caressed. "As long as I can have you I can handle anything."

He gazed at her and the emotions she saw in his eyes told her all she needed to know. Still, buried deep, possibly so deep he didn't even know it was there, she saw a hint of fear.

"You're wearing a bra." His brow arched in surprise.

She smiled sheepishly. "I needed one in that t-shirt."

"You don't anymore." He grinned and, with practiced ease, released the clasp with three fingers. He tossed her bra to the side, his hands moving to cup her breasts.

She closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of having his hands on her again but only for a moment. She clasped his wrists, effectively stopping his massaging of her breasts and gazed into his eyes. "I'm not asking for a lifetime commitment, Derek," she said softly. "At least not yet." He smiled at that. "And I'm only asking for one promise from you, but it may be the most difficult that I could ask."

"You have my fidelity, Alicia," he said, effectively reading her mind. "I think you've had it since the moment I saw you."

When he kissed her it was unlike any kiss they shared to date. His mouth took hers and she felt it as he released all his sadness, fear, relief, lust, desire and finally his love into her. She gasped from the intensity of it all when he finally broke the kiss to remove her jeans.

Together, they made quick work in removing the remainder of their clothing. Both completely naked, Alicia pushed Derek to lie on

the sofa. "It's my turn to be on top." She watched in marveled fascination as the anticipation wash over his features.

There was no need for foreplay. He was hard as a rock and she wet as a river, both aching to be as one again. She straddled him, her gaze locked on his as she slowly lowered herself onto him, her pussy easily taking every inch of his thick long cock until he was buried balls deep inside her.

"Geezus Alicia." He groaned, gasped.

She put her hands on either side of his head. When he tried to move under her, she pushed down with her hips, pinning him to the sofa. "I love you Derek."

He traced the outline of her jaw with the back of one finger. "And I love you."

She knew from the sound of his voice, the look in his eyes he meant it. She lifted her hips until he nearly slid out of her pussy then slowly lowered herself on his cock once more. She was teasing him, baiting him and it was fun, oh so fun. She repeated the slow up and down slide and couldn't help but smile as his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Alicia." He made her name a warning.

"Yes Derek?" She feigned innocence.

"If you expect me to let you remain in control you better pick up the pace, sweetheart. We can make love later. Right now I want to fuck you. Right now *I* need to be fucked."

That was all it took. Alicia allowed herself one more tantalizing upward slide before slamming her body down hard on his cock.

His hips rocked under her, skillfully keeping up with the fast pace she set. When it no longer seemed to be fast enough, he grabbed her hips and moved her faster.

His deep penetration lit her on fire. Her juices gushed around his dick. Keeping a firm grip on one hip, his other hand slid between them, his thumb finding her swollen clit.

She sat up on top of him, using the back of the sofa for leverage as

she rode him. He fingered her clit as he pounded into her pussy and when he caught her bud between two fingers and pinched she cried out so loud the people outside the bus probably heard. She exploded in an earth-shattering orgasm around him, the moment so intense she didn't realize he was coming with her until she felt his seed shoot inside her.

Breathless and completely spent, she fell on top of him. "My God," she said in a shaky whisper.

Derek chuckled softly, his arms wrapping around her waist to hold her tightly. "If I hadn't already promised you fidelity, sweetheart, I dammed sure would after that."

They lay fused together until their heartbeats slowed. When she felt his hold on her ease, she raised up to look at him. "I guess we should get dressed so the other guys can get on the bus. Don't you have to leave soon?"

"Probably." Idly, he twirled several strands of her hair around his finger. "I have no idea what time it is. Do you have to go back home tonight?"

"No." The mere thought of leaving him again wound her stomach in knots. "But where will I go?"

"With me."

"You mean on the road?" She couldn't believe he wanted her to travel with him. "But what about the guys?"

"With the mood I've been in lately, they'll be so happy I'm not biting their heads off they won't care. We can close off this room and sleep in here. Just like this as far as I'm concerned."

"Just like this?" Alicia repeated, raising one questioning brow.

"I want to stay inside you all night long." He flexed his cock still inside her womb and her breath caught as the arousal built, stirred juices she thought to be completely spent.

"What about the guys, and the bus driver? We can get a bit loud at times."

"They have headphones." He shrugged and shot her a

mischievous grin. “Seriously baby, we have another show tomorrow night. Then we have a day off and two shows after that before we head home. Stay with me?”

Even if she wanted to, there was no way she could say no to the pleading in his eyes, in his voice. “I’ll stay. For a long as you want me to.”

“Forever?” he asked in a whisper, pulling her mouth to his.

“Forever,” she whispered against his lips and then lost herself in his kiss.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bestselling author Tonya Ramagos spends much of her time daydreaming about one plot or another. Give her a cup of hazelnut flavored coffee and a keyboard and she is at her happiest. When she isn't writing, thinking about writing, or plotting what to write, she can be found taking on the mother role with her two boys and the husband, too. She enjoys taking long walks on the nature trails near her home in Chattanooga, TN, playing computer games, swinging on the playground, dancing, and curling up with a good book.



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