



Lap Dance

Veronica Wilde

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Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Devin Govaere

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Blurb

How does a friendship catch fire? It starts with a lap dance...

Alexandra and Diego are coworkers who won't risk their friendship for the lusty fling they secretly want. Newly divorced and fresh from the suburbs, Alexandra's afraid that if she gives him her body, he'll steal her heart. A bisexual ex-model too gorgeous for his own good, Diego is afraid the true intensity of his passion will scare off the skittish Alexandra. So they skate along as friends, never confronting the depth of their feelings.

A fun night out at a male strip club changes everything when a wild young stripper electrifies them both. Sexy and mysterious with a dangerous past, Tristan is the ultimate bad boy, firing up their desire even as he arouses their jealousy. Soon they're competing against each other in a battle of male vs. female sexual wiles. It's a dead heat until the night their rivalry turns explosive at an auction of the raciest kind...

Chapter One

I'm going to go crazy if they play this song one more time, Alexandra thought.

It was an inane new hit called “Jungle Cat” and Maxwell’s Department Store played it over the sound system at least six times a day. For reasons neither Alexandra nor her coworkers could understand, the store had just a few playlists of about thirty songs each that they recycled nonstop. The staff in the cosmetics department got so sick of hearing them that they had approached the store management with other CDs to break up the monotony. Their requests went ignored. Maxwell’s staff and shoppers were still entertained by—or suffered from, according to your perspective—the same repetitive songs.

This one was the most annoying, in Alexandra’s opinion, because of the ridiculous lyrics. *Jungle cat, on the prowl, looking sexy, make me howl*. She didn’t need to hear anything that reminded her of just how long it had been since someone had made her howl.

“Ugh, I am so sick of this stupid song!” Nola, her closest friend at work, yanked open a drawer of lip glosses and restlessly rifled through the contents. “Especially right now. I *don’t* want to hear songs about sex.”

Alexandra grimaced. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Nola threw her a skeptical look and slammed the drawer shut. “Oh yeah, right. Like you couldn’t get laid in a *second* if you really wanted to.”

Nola had been on edge ever since getting dumped by her boyfriend five days ago. In Alexandra’s view their break-up was a good thing, as Ben had been an insensitive jerk. He had only called Nola when he wanted sex and ignored her the rest of the time. But she tried to muster some sympathy as she unpacked a new shipment of moisturizer. “Nola, he was completely unworthy of you. You can do so much better.”

“Easy for you to say, Lex. *You’re* not the one with thirty pounds to lose.” Nola pushed back her long red hair and scowled at herself in one of the many nearby counter mirrors. At just after ten-thirty a.m., they were enjoying that daily lull before the rush of lunch hour shoppers. “Guys want a girl like you, not me. Look at you!”

She pushed the mirror before Alexandra. Forcing a smile, Alexandra reviewed herself: pale blue eyes emphasized with makeup, and shoulder-length wavy black hair that today was partially swept up. With her pale skin, people had always told her that she looked like Snow White. Not the sexiest comparison, but she knew it was intended as a compliment.

“Um, you don’t see hotties beating down my door,” Alexandra pointed out. “I’ve been dateless since the day I got divorced, remember?”

“By choice. I, on the other hand—”

“—are fine the way you are. Lots of guys like curvy girls.” Alexandra looked over her shoulder to make sure the other makeup artists couldn’t hear them. “Look, the real issue is that we spend too many nights with the gay guys here going to their bars. We need to start going to straight bars—and meeting straight guys.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.” Nola moodily toyed with a foundation brush. “Maybe we should go somewhere new Friday night.”

A high-pitched voice interrupted them. “Friday night? Are you guys talking about my party?”

Alexandra and Nola winced in unison as their coworker Heidi approached. Blonde and plastic-pretty, Heidi was vociferously competitive for both customers and commissions. She didn’t make it a secret that she considered herself the top makeup artist at Maxwell’s, especially around their manager, Lynette.

Nola’s response was blunt. “Why would we be talking about your party when we’re not invited, Heidi?”

Heidi’s shrill laugh spilled over the department. “Oh, stop it. It’s a party for *couples*, you guys. I can’t help it if you two are the only single ones around here!” Her heavily mascaraed eyes twinkled. “I can’t wait for Friday night. I love throwing dinner parties!”

“Well, we can’t wait to hear about it,” Nola said sarcastically. “I bet it’s going to be a scene out of Sodom and Gomorrah!”

“You know it,” Heidi agreed, clearly unaware of what Sodom and Gomorrah actually was, before hurrying to intercept a new customer.

Nola and Alexandra turned away. “God, she’s so rude,” Alexandra groaned softly. “Bragging about her stupid party when we’re not good enough to get invited.”

“But we’re *single*,” Nola mimicked in her tone. “God, Alexandra, like that’s so uncool!” She glanced over her shoulder at the other cluster of makeup artists gathered around the new display. “Heidi’s been an even bigger idiot than usual since she got engaged.”

Alexandra began to respond when she noticed a phenomenon in the neighboring shoe department. Three of the young salesmen had all gone silent and still, staring toward the store entrance. The rapt admiration on their faces told her exactly what—or rather, who—had captured their attention.

Slowly, her stomach going tight, she turned to see Diego Garcia striding through the department store. Six feet four of tanned, gorgeous manhood, he turned the heads of both men and women in every department. His emerald green eyes and dazzling smile stood out in his dark bronzed skin. His silky coal black hair played up the high cheekbones that had once put him on magazine covers and fashion runways. At thirty-two, he had retired from a successful modeling career several years ago. But in Alexandra’s secret opinion, the subsequent years had only increased his dangerous allure.

“Diego!” Heidi squealed. She never failed to kiss his butt, Alexandra noticed, probably because as the regional retail coordinator for their makeup brand, Diego had a good deal of power. He spent one week a month at their store and Heidi usually spent that week trying to suck up to him. “Yay, you’re finally here!”

“Yes, I’m here and with bonuses for everyone!” His deep, smooth voice was laced with sarcasm, but his face was entirely serious. Diego had an amazing ability to fool people when he felt like it.

“Oh my god, for real?” Heidi clapped her hands together.

“No. I was kidding.” He dropped the massive box on the counter. “That’s the new Valentine’s Day collection. We can’t display it for two more weeks, but you can start getting familiar with the products now.”

With shrieks of excitement, the other makeup artists ripped into the box. Diego passed them by to head right for her and Nola. As his green eyes locked on hers, Alexandra forced a neutral expression. She knew it was ridiculous, but Diego’s stunning

looks always made her knees go a little weak every time she saw him.

His devilish grin spread across his face. “And how are the most beautiful girls at Maxwell’s doing this morning?”

“Crappy,” snapped Nola. She never bothered to kiss anybody’s butt. It was one of the things Alexandra liked most about her. “All we’ve done lately are makeovers on women who don’t even buy anything.”

Diego laughed. “That’s the customer service spirit, Nola. You just love working with the public, don’t you?”

Alexandra stepped in before Nola came back with a sharper retort. “Uh, Diego... Ben broke up with her. Give her a break.”

Diego’s green eyes flared wide. He could be cocky sometimes, and he tended to be a little too fun-loving and wild for Alexandra’s tastes, but at heart he was a compassionate guy. “What? That goddamned bastard. He never did appreciate you.”

Nola’s brown eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. Without a word, she headed for the ladies’ lounge.

“Oops.” Diego looked guilty.

Alexandra shook her head. “Nothing we can do. She’s got to go through the pain to get to the other side.”

“You should know.”

Alexandra gave him a sharp look, but Diego innocently checked his watch. “I’m going to look over the sales records, but let’s have lunch, just us. I want to talk to you about something.”

That sounded almost ominous. Yet she couldn’t deny the pleasure of having Diego’s attention all to herself. They’d become good friends over this last year of working together. Every time he took her and Nola out to one of his favorite gay bars, he was besieged by former and would-be boyfriends. They rarely spent any one-on-one time together.

Before she could respond, she caught him looking over her shoulder into the shoe department. A predatory smile spread across his face. She suspected he was checking out a young French salesclerk who had put all the male makeup artists in a tizzy.

“Well, well. Who’s the new guy?”

Sure enough, the pretty dark-eyed boy was leaning over the register with a smoldering look. “He’s a snob,” Alexandra told him flatly. “All of the guys here have tried to talk to him and he barely says hi.”

“He may be a snob, but he is wearing the hell out of those pants.” Diego checked him out again then turned away. “Lunch, Lex. Don’t forget. And don’t invite anyone else.”

Alexandra began cleaning up the lipstick display racks. How typical of Diego to have a new conquest picked out ten minutes after arriving in the store. It seemed to be how things were going for her these days: hearing about everyone else’s love life while she spent her nights alone.

I’m not in love with you anymore. Those were the words that had destroyed her world a year and a half ago. Her husband, Conrad, had delivered the news casually, as if he had better things to do—and as it turned out, he did. He was in love with one of his students, a twenty-year-old English major. It was exactly how he and Alexandra had met when she was nineteen, and she remembered well the exciting charge of their forbidden

romance: going out of town for secret dates, sneaking out of his home at all hours of the night. She had been so naive then, believing that she had won her sexy thirty-six-year-old professor's love because of her maturity. Now that Conrad had left her for another starry-eyed student, she understood that what he had loved about her was her innocence and wide-eyed admiration.

When they married, she'd thought that she'd always be a younger woman to him. Apparently sometime around twenty-five, she'd stopped being young enough.

More than her marriage had ended last year. Her entire way of life had. Living in the suburbs, filling her days with classes for her master's degree and her nights with faculty parties, had become stifling. She'd always been aware that other girls her age were dating, traveling and dancing until dawn at trendy clubs, while she was preparing for the academic career Conrad insisted she have. But now she could admit how stale and unappealing that lifestyle had become. She was still young. She was tired of her suburban housing development, where all of her neighbors were married and raising families. So she'd taken her small divorce settlement, bought a condo in the city and begun a fun new career as a makeup artist.

Most days she loved her exciting new life. It was scary sometimes, having to face down her initial fears of living alone, supporting herself and making a new circle of friends. Even buying her eighth story condo with its big windows had forced her to confront her childhood fear of heights. But all of that she had learned to handle. What she hadn't counted on was the loneliness that dogged her nights. She hadn't dated at all since her divorce. Meeting men was almost impossible, since all of her customers were female and the bars Diego took her and Nola to were gay. And though she hated to admit it, the idea of getting naked and vulnerable with a new man was terrifying. Despite daily compliments from her customers, Conrad's rejection had left her feeling insecure about her sex appeal. She had been estranged from men her own age for so long that she wasn't even sure how to talk to one.

A miserable sigh escaped her as she glanced at Diego. Somehow he'd achieved the impossible; the conceited shoe clerk had crossed over and begun chatting him up at the registers. *Typical*, Alexandra thought. Diego had a charisma that attracted both men and women like moths to a flame. His refusal to commit to anyone only seemed to make him more irresistible to his fans. Feeling more annoyed than she knew she had a right to be, she turned her attention back to the display cases.

It was just past noon when a commanding hand took her by the elbow. "Finish up this sale and then clock out," Diego told her.

Alexandra enjoyed the suspicious looks Heidi shot them as they exited the cosmetics department. "Where are we going?"

"That French bakery. It's quieter there. We can talk."

That surprised her. Talk? Diego wasn't known for his love of deep conversation. He liked to party, liked to travel, liked to deliver his teasing sarcasm in a deadpan voice, then laugh when people took him literally. He was good at his job. When it came to training the makeup artists at various department stores on new collections, he was an excellent communicator, diplomatic but efficient. Yet at his core, Diego was all about having fun. His preoccupied mood today was highly unusual.

Once, of course, he'd been very different. Diego had told her that back in his modeling days, before they'd even met, he'd struggled with a fairly serious drug problem.

An addiction to cocaine had made his life a living hell, along with a rollercoaster relationship with a famous photographer. He'd freed himself from both by quitting the industry and checking into rehab. Now he lived a clean and sober life, though one still full of adventure.

After they ordered lunch in the bakery, Diego drummed his hands on the table. "So," he said. "What's new in the world of Maxwell's?"

"Typical drama. Between consoling Nola and trying to keep her from killing Heidi, my hands are full."

Diego laughed. "Yes, Princess Heidi. What's she done now?"

"She's throwing a dinner party Friday, and she invited everyone but me and Nola. Not that we *want* to go but she keeps saying how it's only for couples, and we're too single to come." She rolled her eyes.

Diego scoffed. "Let her have her boring Stepford wife party. She's just jealous because our slutty single lives are where it's at."

"Um, more like celibate single life in my case."

Diego's magnetic green eyes bore into her. "Still haven't found anyone good enough to break your vow of chastity?"

"Shush!" She glanced around, embarrassed that the other lunch diners might have overheard. "It isn't a *vow*, Diego. I just don't meet a lot of guys. I've explained this to you a million times."

"Well, I know one guy who'd be happy to cure your frustration."

A slow, wicked smile spread across his face. The gleam in his eyes made his meaning very clear.

A hot flush crept up Alexandra's cheeks. "Diego, be serious."

She never knew what to say when he joked about them having sex. On the one hand, she knew he was just kidding. She didn't go in for casual bedroom romps, and he knew that so he felt safe to tease her.

On the other hand, he was too hot for her to shrug off the jokes completely. Diego radiated an animal magnetism that got under her skin no matter how many times she reminded herself they were just friends. In reality, she knew a wild bisexual Casanova was the last kind of person she should jump back into the dating game with. Yet she also knew in her bones that a night with him would be unforgettable indeed.

Yeah, and the next day would be too awkward to ever work with him again, let alone go back to being friends. He might be comfortable with casual sex, but you aren't.

"I'm always serious," he said. "Serious about having fun." He winked at the server who had appeared with their lunch. "The point of life is to enjoy it, right?"

The server looked dazzled. "I—yes, absolutely," she stammered.

It never failed. Diego put people under his spell wherever they went. "Why did you want to have lunch?" Alexandra asked pointedly when the server left.

"Right." His handsome face turned serious. "I got some news last week, and it concerns you. Or it could. This stays between us, okay?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Good. Here's the deal. Lynnette's daughter has cancer, and she's quitting to take care of her and the grandkids. That leaves the counter manager job open. Now we both know Heidi's going to want it—and the truth is, she has seniority over you. But I think you'd be better for it, and I'm going to recommend you for the job." He sat back.

Alexandra's mind reeled. From the horrible news of Lynnette's family crisis to the possibility of a new position, Diego had just given her a lot to think about. "Wow."

"It's a good job, Lex. You'd still get to work with customers, but you'd also be spending at least one day a week at headquarters, training on new product and marketing. That'd give you a break from working the floor every day. And, if the company likes you, you can keep going up the ladder. Times are tough, but the beauty industry is still making sales."

She didn't know what to say. "Poor Lynnette. She's never said a word. So what do you need me to do?"

"Nothing for now. I just wanted to check if you're interested. And prepare you for a showdown with Heidi." He cut into his chicken. "Think about it and let me know, okay?"

She nodded. "Sure."

"One more thing, Lex—in addition to your commissions, you'll be making a higher base salary as well. You'll also get a one thousand dollar signing bonus."

She gulped. More money was something she sorely needed. She was living paycheck to paycheck right now. This new job could be the answer to her prayers.

That clever smile resurfaced on Diego's face. "And don't forget my other offer as well. The fun one."

Alexandra almost choked on her salad. Damn him and his dirty sense of humor. Maintaining her composure around him was just about impossible sometimes.

* * * *

The cosmetics counter was in full swing when they returned from lunch. Heidi wasn't too busy to flash them an annoyed look, but she had her hands full with two soccer moms who were testing anti-aging serums. Nola was patiently doing a makeover on a teenage girl. Alexandra quickly checked her reflection in the mirror for smudged eyeliner or streaky blush, then jumped back in the retail fray.

When she finally got a break, Heidi was talking again about her party.

"It's going to be catered," she said. "I'm serving these Cornish game hens that are to die for. Diego, you should come! Bring whoever you're dating."

Nola shot Alexandra a look of pure venom. *What a twit*, her face said. *We're not good enough to get invited, but he is, of course.*

"Can't," Diego said with a yawn. "I've got hot plans on Friday with Lex and Nola, and I wouldn't miss it for the world."

What a great actor he was, Alexandra thought. They hadn't even discussed Friday night, but Diego was acting like it was a done deal.

Heidi frowned. She clearly didn't like hearing something else trumped her party. "Like what?"

Twin devilish dimples appeared in his cheeks. "Strippers, Heidi. Hot, naked strippers."

A shocked silence fell over the floor.

It was all Alexandra could do not to choke. She pretended to check her fingernail polish, fighting to maintain a poker face, then glanced at Nola. Her brown eyes were wide with astonishment.

"You're joking," Heidi said finally.

"Very serious," Diego corrected her. "What's more fun than hot athletic guys taking

off their clothes? Well, other than Cornish game hens, of course.”

Alexandra felt the irrepressible urge to burst into laughter. Rapidly walking around the corner, she barely made it to the shoe department before she collapsed into giggles.

The soft call of her name distracted her. Wiping her eyes, she turned to see a familiar white-haired customer by the lipsticks.

“Hello, Alexandra,” Mrs. Levinson called. She waved a blue knit glove at her.

Alexandra pushed Diego’s sarcasm out of her mind. “Hi, Mrs. Levinson,” she said cheerfully. “What brings you in today?”

Mrs. Levinson was a regular who came into Maxwell’s at least twice a week for no real reason. She rarely bought anything, but she loved playing with the makeup and chattering with the salesgirls. Because she wasn’t a lucrative customer, most of them ignored her, so Alexandra always tried to attend to her.

“Oh, I’m just looking, dear. What color lipstick is that you’re wearing?”

“Orient Red.” Alexandra helped her try lipsticks on the back of her hand. “This one would be a nice shade on you.”

“Oh my. Who is that? Is that your husband?”

Alexandra looked up to find her staring at Diego. She bit back a smile. Mrs. Levinson might be in her early eighties, but she apparently still had an eye for a good-looking man. “That’s our regional coordinator. His name is Diego.” They had actually met several times before, but apparently she didn’t remember.

“What a nice-looking young man. Is he your husband?”

“No, we just work together.” Alexandra reached for another lipstick to distract her, but Diego was headed for them.

“You look like a very nice young man,” Mrs. Levinson told him. “I thought you were Alexandra’s husband!”

“Nope. Just her love slave.” Diego lightly touched the back of her neck. An electric jolt snaked through her, and she jumped. She cursed herself and hoped he hadn’t noticed.

“Diego!” she growled under her breath.

Mrs. Levinson only chuckled. “You two would make a lovely couple. I just don’t understand why a pretty girl like you doesn’t have a young man, Alexandra.”

This was something Mrs. Levinson said at least once a week. Alexandra didn’t want to explain that she had had an older man who then dumped her for a younger woman, and as a result, she was now a little gun-shy around all men, of all ages. “Maybe someday, Mrs. Levinson.”

Alexandra helped her sample a few more lipsticks. At last, Mrs. Levinson sweetly bid her goodbye and wandered off. Nola was at Diego’s side a moment later. “Strippers?” she hissed. “Diego, you were kidding, right?”

“Of course I wasn’t.” Diego looked unbearably smug as he popped a mint in his mouth. “Guys go see strippers when they get dumped. Why shouldn’t you?”

Nola giggled nervously. “Um, I’ve only seen three men naked in my entire life. In person, I mean.”

“Well, that’s just sad. We need to fix that. Think about it... A hot guy showing off his tight, washboard stomach as he unbuttons his pants and slides them down his hips...”

“Diego, if she’s not comfortable with it, she’s not comfortable,” Alexandra told him. “And I don’t really want some strange guy’s junk in my face either.” The idea of muscle guys slicked up in baby oil and cheesy g-strings struck her as kind of gross.

“...showing you his hard cock and stroking himself for your pleasure...”

“Diego! There are customers right over there!”

He laughed his rich laugh and slid his arms around both of them. “Oh, come on. You both need to bust out of your comfort zone. It’ll be fun. My friends go to Heartbreakers all the time, and they love it.”

“Heartbreakers?” Alexandra pulled back and looked at him. She’d heard about that place. It featured fully nude dancers and catered to a clientele of older gay men. “Um, Diego, that’s a *gay* strip club. They’re not going to want female customers in there.”

Diego rolled his eyes. “That’s ridiculous. Yeah, it’s mostly gay men who go there, but there’s no official rule banning women. And the dancers don’t care who’s stuffing money into their underwear.” His tone turned cajoling. “All we’re talking about is a night ogling some hot naked boys. What could be bad about that?”

Hot naked boys. The words echoed in Alexandra’s ear like a magical incantation. It had been too long, far too long, since any hot boys, naked or otherwise, had crossed her path. God knew she could use some.

“I can’t believe I’m going to do this,” Nola muttered. She pulled anxiously at her black shirt, smoothing it over her stomach. All of the makeup artists wore black as it was supposed to look fashionable. “Okay, I’ll go. But I’m warning you right now, I’m *not* getting a lap dance.” She headed off to intercept a customer trying on lipstick without a tester.

Diego smirked. “Looks like it’s a date.”

She ignored the wicked gleam in his eyes. “Fine. But for the record, I’m not getting a lap dance either.”

“The hell you’re not. Look at it as therapy. A re-introduction to the mysteries of the penis.” She glared at him, but he merely laughed. “You’re young, Lex. It’s time to act like it.”

She laughed hollowly. “Young? You have to realize that I spent the last six years playing house in the suburbs, Diego. All of Conrad’s friends were in their forties. I know I’m only twenty-six, but I feel so much older than everyone else my age.”

“So age backwards.” He gave her a loose hug. “Friday night. Be ready.”

Chapter Two

Friday evening found her staring hopelessly into her closet. It was a cold January night. Normally about now, she'd be changing into a tee shirt and flannel pajama bottoms and settling in to watch an old movie, her cat Pasquale by her side. Tonight was a rare opportunity to actually dress up and try to look sexy. True, she'd be surrounded by a bunch of gay strippers who wouldn't be the least bit interested in her, but it would still be her most erotic adventure since ... well, since getting married. *That's just sad.* Diego's words echoed in her mind. He'd been speaking to Nola, but his words applied to her as well. But dammit, she was sick of being timid, lonely Alexandra. She was going to have fun tonight, and she was going to look her best while she did it.

She fingered her red cocktail dress before glancing uneasily at the frigid night outside. No sense in freezing her butt off for a bunch of guys who wouldn't even look twice at her. Instead, she pulled out a pair of tight black velvet pants and a dangerously low-cut black sweater, then headed into the bathroom to do her makeup. Knowing the club would be dark, she emphasized her pale blue eyes with heavy mascara and liner, then dusted a bit of highlighting powder on her cheekbones. Her hair she left down in soft waves. Yet, when it came to wearing her sensible boots, she rebelled. Only one pair of shoes worked with this outfit and that was a pair of black strappy heels that had no business being worn on such an icy night.

She slipped them on anyhow.

Her cell phone rang. "I'm in the cab on the way to your place," Diego said. "ETA two minutes."

"I'll be down." She hung up and took a deep breath, trying to quell the butterflies in her stomach.

She was about to be surrounded by naked guys. No matter how breezy she wanted to act about it, the idea made her nervous. Not that she didn't love the naked male body. But that was with a man *she* picked and explored in the privacy of her bedroom. She'd only slept with one boyfriend before meeting Conrad her sophomore year of college; a woman of the world she wasn't. Even getting naked with both Conrad and her old boyfriend had made her shy at first.

All the same, the idea of the men working to entice *her* was appealing. All the porn she'd ever seen had seemed to cater to men. *Where are the hot guys?* She'd always wondered when Conrad had rented dirty movies for them to see. Pretty naked girls abounded, but the male actors had been mostly unattractive. Even in regular films, it was always the females that went topless, while the men stayed clothed. The idea of evening the score did appeal to her.

All you have to do is watch, Alexandra. No physical contact required.

She kissed Pasquale goodbye on top of his head, then grabbed her purse. The taxi pulled up just as she walked outside. As she slid into the cab, Diego unrolled that dazzling grin that had once earned him a small fortune every day. "Nervous?" He pulled her close against him and kissed her hair.

She didn't want to admit how good his arm felt around her. "Maybe a little..."

"Don't be. If any of the dancers bother you, I'll take care of it." He pulled her coat

open. “And with the cleavage you’re showing, they probably will.”

“Diego!” She snatched her lapels away from him. “These guys aren’t going to care about my boobs.”

“All men care about boobs, Lex, gay or straight. Listen, two of my friends are meeting us there—they know some of the dancers and will make sure Nola has a good time.”

“Good idea.” She was touched by Diego’s consideration. Despite her sarcastic manner, Nola could be quite shy in unfamiliar social situations.

The cab pulled up in front of Nola’s building. Alexandra was pleased to see that beneath her coat, she was wearing a form-fitting sweater that showed off her curves.

“Hot mama,” Alexandra teased her, poking her side as she slid in.

“Whatever,” Nola muttered, but she looked pleased.

Diego leaned forward. “Heartbreakers,” he instructed the driver. “Down by the waterfront.”

Alexandra watched with interest as the taxi headed down into a seedy part of the city. Soon they were traveling down dark, empty streets lined by warehouses and abandoned buildings. The dim flicker of old streetlights shone on puddles of melted snow, giving off an eerie glow. She was beginning to wonder just where they were when the cab made an abrupt left and pulled over.

Through the snow-streaked window, she saw a blue neon heart with an arrow through it next to a flashing sign: HEARTBREAKERS.

As they emerged from the taxi, Alexandra was dismayed to hear the faint beat of “Jungle Cat” audible in the parking lot. Dammit, there was just no escaping that ridiculous song. Hopefully, it wasn’t a bad sign. Yet, as she paid the cover charge, showed her ID and held out her hand to be stamped, her stomach began to flutter. The reality that she was about to see her first naked man—men, actually—in well over a year hit her hard.

Diego put his arms around both her and Nola and steered them down a narrow hall. “Remember to keep your hands to yourself, you little nymphos. No pawing. I know how out of control you two can get.”

“Is that why we’ve never pawed you?” Alexandra asked innocently.

“You’re just intimidated by my dashing good looks.” Diego led them into a huge dark room with flashing lights. “Cool, Lyle and Todd are already here. This way.”

Alexandra stopped, too stunned to keep walking. The scene around her overwhelmed all of her senses, from the booming music to the reddish stage lights to the mingled scents of varied colognes. It was her eyes, though, that feasted on the scene before her. A variety of fit young men moved through the dimly-lit club, all of them clad only in underwear. Each was different from the next. Some were fair and some were dark; some were hulking and muscular while others sported sinewy, snake-hipped builds. Some looked very clean-cut, while some had an edgier, trendy look.

All of them were sexy.

Diego nudged her. “Lex. Come on.”

She followed him to the table, not once taking her eyes off the dancers. Some of them dispensed shoulder rubs to the male clientele, but others slid onto the customers’ laps and gave them lap dances right there at the table. However, the real action was clearly happening in a side room blocked by a long, black curtain. It was open just

enough for Alexandra to see a room of leather couches. She caught a glimpse of a naked young man writhing on an older man's lap.

Diego gently pushed her into a chair. "Lex, Nola, these are my friends Lyle and Todd."

Lyle leaned over the table with a warm smile. "We come here a lot so we know most of the dancers by name. Just ask if you want a lap dance from anyone."

"Thanks." Alexandra took another dazed look around. From customers to coworkers, her daily life was dominated by women. Seeing so many cute boys everywhere made her feel like she'd been dropped into an alternate universe of pure, gorgeous testosterone.

"Quit gawking," Diego teased her. "God, you'd think you haven't seen a naked man in... Oh, wait."

She smacked him. "Enough with the *Alexandra's so hard up* jokes. You don't see me calling you a slut."

"Slut! I'll have you know I'm very discriminating." He nudged her to look at the stage. "Only the A-list hotties make my team. Like him."

Alexandra looked at the stage. There, casually winding his way around a pole, was a clean-cut young man with the preppy good looks of an All-American frat boy. Perfectly buff with short blond hair and a tan, he flashed an inviting smile at the crowd. Under the red stage lights he looked as if he had just stepped out of an Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue. So that was Diego's dream boy, was it? Unable to repress a spurt of jealousy, Alexandra wondered if he preferred blonde women as well.

A waiter clad in cut-off shorts leaned over. "Did you want a soda or seltzer? No alcohol per state law since it's a fully nude bar."

"Seltzer's fine." A vodka tonic would have been better to settle her nerves, but that was okay. She glanced back at the stage. To her astonishment, the blond stripper was watching her as he ground against the pole. Unsettled, she turned to Nola. "So what do you think?"

Nola's big brown eyes looked entranced. "These guys are way cuter than I thought they'd be. Good variety too."

"Yeah." Alexandra took another glance around the club. "They aren't what I expected at all."

The music died, and the blond stripper left the stage. She turned toward Lyle and Todd to ask how much a lap dance cost. Even if Nola was too chicken to get one, she definitely wanted to buy one for Diego. He deserved one for taking them out like this, and secretly, she knew she would enjoy the sight of a pretty boy grinding on his lap all too well. But her attention was diverted by the DJ's booming voice.

"And now the boy you've all been waiting for... let's give it up for Tristan!"

Was it her imagination, or did the entire audience seem to go quiet and lean forward in their chairs?

The backstage curtain parted. A young man with a silky mess of dark hair walked out, bare-chested above his faded jeans. Alexandra instinctively went still, riveted by his cool, insouciant walk as he headed up the stairs to the stage. This stripper was no preppy fantasy like the last guy. Both of his nipples were pierced with tiny barbells, and she could see twin serpentine tattoos adorning his cut biceps, with another tattoo on his left pectoral muscle. The waist of his jeans fell slightly off his narrow hips, as if inviting the audience to strip off his pants. Yet his face was a mystery, hidden by his hair as he wiped

down the silver pole with disinfectant.

From his defiant walk to the hard definition of his abs, he commanded attention.

Alexandra shifted in her seat. Though she'd never been comfortable admitting it, this was the kind of guy she'd always been secretly attracted to in college: a bad boy, the kind who had his own punk rock band and too many notches on his bedpost.

Diego elbowed her. "You seem impressed."

The waiter stepped in front of her, blocking her view. Jolted out of her trance, she accepted the cold green bottle of seltzer. "Well... You have to admit, he's pretty impressive."

Diego snorted. "This guy? Seriously? He looks like he just got out of jail."

Lyle leaned over the table. "That's Tristan—he's fairly new. Personally, I think he's a little stuck on himself, but the customers go crazy for him."

"Looks pretty average to me," Diego said coldly. Alexandra shot him an incredulous look.

The music began, and Tristan leapt onto the pole.

Alexandra's jaw dropped open. Tristan moved with astonishing grace and power, swinging his thighs around the pole until he circled around hanging upside down. His chiseled, perfect chest unfurled before the audience's eyes like a work of art. Then he bounced to his feet and taunted them all with a naughty grin, a grin that said he knew he was the pick of the Heartbreakers litter. Alexandra's heart pounded at the first sight of his face. He was even cuter than she'd dared to hope, with wide-set dark eyes in an innocently boyish face. She could see now that he was very young, in his early twenties. His smile projected sweetness and danger at the same time.

She felt almost hypnotized as he swung around the pole again. Men eagerly crowded the stage, holding out dollar bills. He graciously knelt down to accept the money stuffed into his pants.

Nola leaned over. "Wow. Is it even legal to be that cute?"

"If not, I'd like to arrest him." She pushed her hair off her face, feeling flushed.

Tristan leaned against the pole and tugged the waist of his jeans down a few inches. The crowd perceptibly leaned forward as he smiled that naughty-boy smile and lowered them more, his feet beating in time with the music. Alexandra's mouth went drier with every new inch of skin that came into view. In thirty seconds or less, this insanely hot boy was going to get naked, and the anticipation was making her thighs shake.

He wound around the pole in slow circles, easing his pants down until the firm round cheeks of his ass showed. He shook them for the audience, eliciting a cacophony of cheers and whistles. Alexandra held her breath as she waited for him to turn around again and expose his cock.

"Hello there, beautiful."

She jumped as the first stripper they'd seen, the all-American one with the short blond hair and wholesome smile, slid onto the arm of her chair and blocked her view of the stage.

"I'm Hunter," he continued, extending his hand. "I saw you from the stage. It's not often we get girls in here, let alone beautiful ones."

"Oh, hi. I'm Alexandra." Embarrassed and unable to meet his eyes, she sipped her fizzing water. She knew it was probably part of the strippers' act to compliment customers, but witty comebacks weren't exactly her style. Just talking to a handsome

young guy wearing only a tight pair of boxer briefs was unsettling enough.

"Welcome to Heartbreakers, Alexandra. Did you want a dance? It's on the house." He winked at her.

Panic and confusion coursed through her. Get a lap dance already? She wasn't ready for that. And why would it be free? All the same, it seemed rude to refuse his offer. She glanced nervously at Diego for guidance, hoping he would intercede. To her surprise, he was glowering at Hunter.

Now *that* was amusing. Nothing ever rattled Diego's cage. Yet, he was obviously annoyed that this pretty frat boy had approached her, not him.

She smirked. "Sure, why not?" She was *so* going to rub this in Diego's face when she got back. "Lead the way."

Hunter held out a hand, and she accepted it. As he led her away, she took one longing look back at the stage. Sexy Tristan had slipped off his jeans, but he held them over his crotch with a coy smile, teasing them all. Damn it, why didn't he just drop his pants and show off the goods? Hunter led her off through the tables toward that ominous black curtain she'd seen earlier. Several older male customers shot her spiteful glances as they passed, making Alexandra realize that they felt real desire for these dancers. Perhaps everyone knew rationally that these naked young men were simply doing a job, but she could see need and yearning in the customers' eyes. No doubt many of these older men suffered through the same solitary nights she did.

Hunter guided her behind the black curtain into the side room filled with leather couches. She instinctively stepped back as she took in the jolting sight of several naked young men writhing on top of clothed older men.

"Uh-won't these guys mind that a woman is in here?" She knew that technically no real sex act was occurring, but she couldn't help feeling that she was violating a boys' club.

"I don't care if they do." Hunter pushed her into an empty sofa with a devilish smile. She had to admit he was a beautiful man. Yet her mind went blank as he casually pulled off his underwear and straddled her, buck-naked.

He rubbed his jaw close to her mouth. "So have you had a lap dance before?"

She gulped, feeling like a naive kid. She hadn't touched a man since her divorce, but now she had a taut, flesh and blood Adonis on her lap. His perfect white smile offered an invitation of the dirtiest kind. "No..."

"Don't worry. I won't touch you anywhere you don't want."

With that, he slid his hands up her sides, just enough to graze the edges of her breasts. Was that deliberate? Diego had told her and Nola that it was against the law for any actual sexual touching to go on at these places.

She couldn't help admiring his rock-hard quadriceps. "You must work out constantly."

"Not really. I'm a ski instructor during the week, so that right there keeps me pretty fit." Hunter began to grind against her. "Mmm," he whispered. "You are so hot."

It sounded like an obvious line. Sure, he'd said the dance was free, but he probably still counted on her giving him some kind of tip when this was through. All the same, his cock was rapidly stiffening between them. It was impossible to ignore.

"Um..." She indicated his erection. "Aren't all of you guys gay?"

He kissed her ear. "I'm whatever you want me to be."

The other dancers and customers around them finished, leaving them alone in the room. Immediately, Hunter rose up on his knees, brushing his rock-hard erection against her breasts. Unable to stop herself, she arched her back and moaned.

"Nice," he muttered. "You have no idea what a treat it is to have a beautiful woman for a customer." Casually, he slid up her sweater and rubbed the tip of his cock over her bra. Then he slipped his hand between her legs and tickled her clit.

A flush of both fear and excitement washed over her. She hadn't expected this, hadn't expected anyone to touch her so brazenly. Nor had she expected her body to respond so enthusiastically. Yet Hunter continued to stroke her pussy through the velvet until a swift wetness flooded her thighs.

Without warning, he pulled up her bra and fondled her breasts before she could adjust to her sudden toplessness.

"That's enough." She pushed him away and pulled down her top. Suddenly the "free dance" made sense. Hunter wasn't gay at all; he had just wanted to get a chance at feeling her up. "I don't even know you."

Hunter quickly retreated as another stripper and customer entered the room. "Uh, sorry. It seemed like you liked it." He seemed guilty as she pushed him off and stood up. "Did you want me to get you another drink?"

"No." Alexandra felt hot and disoriented as she headed for the curtain. She had to get out of here, had to get this experience under control before his talented fingers and pretty cock lowered any more of her inhibitions.

Hunter stopped her. "Listen... if anyone ever asks, that was the gayest dance you ever got. Obviously not all of the dancers here are gay, but our customers like the illusion that we are. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, whatever." She was starting to feel like a fool. She'd come here expecting to be ignored by a bunch of gay boys. Instead a straight guy had taken full advantage of her inexperience to cop a feel. So what if she had enjoyed it? She was the one who had paid a cover charge to get in here tonight, yet Hunter was the one getting off.

A portly gray-haired man entered the room, brightening when he saw Hunter. "There you are! Hunter, I've looked all over the club for you!" He pompously waved a roll of twenties. "I want you to start my weekend off right."

The forced smile on Hunter's face made Alexandra feel sorry for him—just for a moment. Then it passed. No one was forcing him to work here and give lap dances to older men, she reflected. Besides, he probably made a lot of money at it.

She headed to the bar and signaled the bartender for another seltzer. She was still bewildered at her physical reaction to Hunter's touch. It wasn't like her to let a situation get out of hand like that. Then again, when had she ever experienced anything close to this? Her married life had consisted of dull faculty parties and plays. Her divorced life had consisted of TV shows and the occasional night out with the boys at some local gay bar. Being fondled by a naked stranger was definitely a first.

It was almost eleven o'clock, and the club was more crowded now. On either side of her, men clamored for soft drinks and ice water. Tristan was no longer on the stage, and she was annoyed that she had missed the rest of his performance. All the same, her dance with Hunter had given her an idea. She didn't have to hope that Tristan noticed her; she could simply buy a lap dance from him and live out a temporary fantasy that he was hers.

"Oh no, is your dance over so soon?"

Diego appeared next to her, his perfect face cold in the bar lights.

She tried to fake a satisfied expression. There was no way she was going to tell him how Hunter had tricked her, not when he already thought of her as innocent, sheltered Alexandra. "Yes, another customer cut in."

"Wow, you must have been devastated. You ran off with that guy like he had the last penis on earth." His sarcasm was tinged with bitterness.

"Oh for god's sake. He asked if I wanted a free dance, and I said yes. I didn't *run off* with him."

"Are you kidding? You practically jumped in his lap the second he came over. He wasn't even that cute."

She put her drink down and stared incredulously at him. "Diego, are you serious? You called him an *A-list hottie* when we first got here."

He scoffed. "I did not."

"You did so! You pointed to him and said—"

Someone stumbled into her, knocking her against Diego. She was only aware of something heavy falling against her, and then pain in her toes as immense weight crushed them. *Dammit, why did I wear these stupid shoes!* flashed through her mind as Diego clutched her protectively against him.

The stripper who'd stumbled against her awkwardly straightened up and turned around. "I am so sorry," he said. "Were those your toes I landed on?"

It was Tristan.

Alexandra couldn't find her voice. The throbbing club music seemed to fade as his sexy dark eyes fixed on hers. If Tristan had looked mouthwatering on stage, up close his magnetism was even more overpowering. His black hair was an artfully disarrayed mop, just messy enough to fall long and sexy in his eyes. Naked except for a tight pair of boxer briefs, all pierced nipples and tattooed biceps, he was like a fantasy come to life in front of her. Except, of course, that a fantasy was all bad boys like this had ever been to her. She'd married the safe guy, the boring older professor. She had no idea how to even flirt with a guy this wild.

She forced herself to respond. "It's okay. They'll grow back."

"You sure? I'd hate for you to sue me."

His voice was laced with a Southern accent. It made his smile even cuter, the kind of smile people called *irresistible* because when it broke across his face, she knew that there was nothing she wouldn't do for him. He could ask her to crawl across broken glass into hell for him, and she would. Maybe it was her sexual dry spell, maybe it was a hormonal meltdown, but Tristan's boyish appeal promised the manifestation of erotic fantasies she hadn't known she had until this moment.

"Then you better hope I don't. You'd have to give a lot of lap dances." She couldn't believe she was bantering with him so easily.

"I really am sorry. This guy over here was trying to get a dance, and he's had too much to drink and..." He looked at Diego. Suddenly, Alexandra realized she was still in his arms and struggled free. "I apologize for stepping on your wife's feet."

"She's not my wife." Diego lightly pushed her aside and stepped forward. "You were great on stage, by the way. You're easily the best dancer in here." He held up a twenty. "Do you have time for a dance?"

Alexandra shot him a dirty look. Earlier, he'd had only nasty things to say about

Tristan. What was with the sudden interest?

“Thank you, I appreciate that.” Dimples appeared on either side of his smile, but he looked back at Alexandra. “I think I owe her first, though. Come on, I’ll get you patched up.”

Her heart began to boom as he led her to a private table in the dark recesses of the club.

Okay, this is my chance. Say something clever. Something sexy. Wait, what if he’s gay? Hunter wasn’t, so maybe he’s not either. Oh please don’t let him be gay, not this one.

Tristan signaled a waiter, then knelt down to examine her feet. “Yep, these toes are definitely broken. Thank god you wore such responsible footwear, or it could have been a lot worse.”

She felt foolish. “Okay, I realize wearing these heels on a snowy night seems silly...”

“Hey, if you want to get frostbite, that’s your business.” An impish smile jerked the corners of his mouth. “I’m Tristan, by the way.”

“Alexandra. But you can call me Lex.”

As the waiter brought their drinks, she glanced back at the bar. Diego was staring moodily at the latest stripper onstage. He clearly wasn’t happy that Tristan had ignored his dance request. In fact, he seemed to be having a bad night overall.

Tristan sat down and brought her feet into his lap, removing her shoes. Her mouth fell open as he began to examine and rub her toes.

“Again—I apologize for that jackass who pushed me.” He glanced up at her through his fall of dark hair. “The regulars who give me a lot of money feel they have a claim on my time, and they can get kind of possessive. I can’t really argue with that, you know?”

At first she thought he meant that he could see their point. Then she realized that he literally couldn’t argue with them, because they controlled his income. Apparently the customer-dancer dynamics were very complicated here at Heartbreakers. “No big deal.”

Tristan stroked and rubbed each of her toes with a skill that sent shivers up her spine. “So is this your first time here?”

She struggled to maintain her composure. Every feathery touch on her toes made her nipples stiff and aching. “Uh, yes. I’m with some friends over there.” She indicated their table in the corner where Nola was chatting up a large muscle-bound Latino stripper. “We... we saw you on stage.”

“Oh yeah?” He moved on to rubbing her heels next, awakening sensual sensations she’d never guessed were possible in her feet. “What’d you think? I’ve only been doing this for two months now, so I’m still learning.”

I think you’re incredible, Tristan. I think you’re the sexiest man I’ve ever seen and watching you swing around that pole was nothing short of life-changing.

Her mouth was dry again. She sipped her water. “I thought you were great. Not that I have much to compare you to, but you... definitely seemed to know what you were doing.”

That adorable smile surfaced beneath his hair. “Thanks.” He finished massaging both her feet now, but instead of dropping them, he moved on to her ankles. She gripped her chair, wondering how it was possible to feel such an electric charge from simply having her feet touched. Sure, it was a half-naked beautiful young man doing the touching, but

she'd never responded so easily or swiftly to any man before.

Tristan slipped his hands up under her velvet pants to stroke her calves. Oh god. The touch of his fingers was making her melt. If only he would offer her a free dance like Hunter had, but the cynical part of her suspected that this erotic little massage of his was nothing more than a shrewd marketing move. Probably, it was intended to inspire her to pay for a lap dance, thereby increasing the wad of cash in his underwear. And the annoying thing was it was working. She wanted him naked on her lap *now* and was willing to pay for it.

Tristan slid his hands up to softly squeeze her knees. "Did you get a lap dance yet?"

She swallowed hard. She knew if she said no, he'd probably offer, but she didn't want to lie. "I'm kind of shy," she hedged.

He looked up with a smile so sweet that she felt she would dissolve right there in her chair. "You don't need to be shy with me." His fingers stroked the back of her knees. Alexandra felt close to swooning.

The moment was killed by someone squatting down next to her chair: Hunter, the blond stripper. Oh no.

"Sorry we got interrupted in the VIP room," he said casually. "Whenever you want that next lap dance, just let me know, and we'll finish what we started." He squeezed the back of her neck as if she was a regular customer.

Dammit. Why did he have to show up right now?

Tristan glanced coolly from one to the other. "Well, well," he said. "You've been to the VIP room already. And here you said you were shy."

Hunter snickered. "Shy? This girl? She was moaning underneath me ten minutes ago."

Alexandra could have cheerfully shot him. "I was not moaning! That was my first lap dance. I made you stop—"

A third man appeared at their table, tall, silver-haired and quietly sophisticated. She fell silent, intimidated by his aura of cold power. He ignored her and looked only at Tristan.

"I'd like a moment with you when you're free."

Tristan immediately dropped her legs and straightened up on his chair. "Sure."

Both Hunter and the older man walked away. Tristan stared bleakly at the table. Alexandra waited for him to say something, but it was as if she wasn't there anymore.

She tried to salvage the moment. "Another possessive customer?"

Tristan made a bitter noise. "No. My ex." Looking moody and preoccupied, he stood up, absently patted her arm and walked after the man.

A hot flush of mortification spread up her chest and throat. *My ex.* So Tristan was gay. And here she was, melting over him like he was some kind of punk rock sex god designed specifically for her. What a fool she'd made of herself. Here she'd sworn she wouldn't act like some hard-up spinster drooling over gay men—and now she had done just that. Her feet and knees still seemed to tingle where he had touched her.

Her heart heavy with disappointment, she headed back to their table. Her spirits lifted a little as she noticed that Nola was buried under the big muscular Latino stripper in one of the chairs. Yet Diego was slumped in his chair with a bitter expression, his arms folded.

"Wow. Neither of your lap dances lasted very long," he said snidely. "I guess it's

hard for a woman to hold their attention.”

“I didn’t get a lap dance from Tristan—I got a foot rub. What is your problem tonight? I thought we came here to have fun.” She was baffled by his sour mood. Diego was the ultimate party-goer, the first one to suggest clubbing all night, or skinny-dipping, or taking in a drag show contest. Why was he being so sullen tonight?

“*I* came here to have fun,” he said coldly. “*You* came here apparently to seduce the entire staff.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re being ridiculous.” But she decided to let it go. Clearly Mr. Beautiful wasn’t used to being ignored, and the indifference was more than his ego could handle. There was no point in annoying him further.

Alexandra studied the other strippers working the room, curious how they really felt about doing this job. As a makeup artist, she worked with the public, and that meant dealing with some unpleasant attitudes at times. It was her job to make women feel beautiful; sometimes that meant going along with a woman’s delusion that she looked good in the wrong shades or types of makeup. Much as she loved her job, there were nights she went home ready to quit. No doubt working as a stripper was the ultimate customer service job and more difficult than her worst day.

Tristan was nowhere in sight. His silver-haired ex was sitting alone at a table up front with an untouched glass of sparkling water. His eyes were intent on the empty stage. Alexandra suspected that meant Tristan was up next, and as a thunderous new song began, she knew she was right.

He burst out of the back curtain in black leather pants and a Lone Ranger mask, a paddle dangling from his hand. She couldn’t help admiring how mysterious and cute he looked as men began swarming the stage again to tuck money into his pants. Should she tip him? Gay or not, he’d given her a hell of a foot rub.

Fishing a dollar bill from her purse, she approached the stage with a determined smile and waited behind two other men. He hugged them lightly then sank to his knees in front of Alexandra. His mysterious dark eyes connected with hers.

“I’m not done with our conversation,” he said in her ear over the music. “Wait for me, okay?”

A rush of excitement shot through her. She nodded and returned to her seat. A stocky Italian stripper was finally paying attention to Diego, but Diego barely acknowledged him. Todd and Lyle were sharing a table dance with another stripper, and Nola was missing entirely. She poked Diego. “Where’s No?”

“She went to the VIP room with that big Cuban guy.”

Good for her. They could compare notes later on their dances. Alexandra trained her eyes on the stage, eager to see Tristan naked at last, but instead another stripper joined him. Tristan roughly pulled off the dancer’s underwear, then bent him over and spanked him to the cheers and whistles of the crowd. After they finished, she headed off to the ladies’ room to check her makeup.

“Hey, beautiful.”

She recognized that faint Southern twang even before she turned. Tristan was behind her in the narrow hall, smiling that impish smile. He was back in his black boxer briefs, his dark hair damp and rumpled from performing.

She swallowed. “Hey yourself.”

Without another word, he took her by the hand and led her into a small office. “We

can talk here,” he said as the door swung shut and eliminated most of the club music. “Listen, I’m sorry I just up and left you earlier. My ex, Russell, actually owns the club. Things are a little weird between us since we broke up, and I don’t want to piss him off as long as I work here.”

She slipped into a green leather chair. “He’s not taking your breakup well?”

Tristan hesitated. “Well, it’s more complicated than that. I owe him, kind of. He got me out of some... Ah, legal trouble last year.” He looked embarrassed.

Alexandra remembered Diego’s snide comment: *he looks like he just got out of jail*. Apparently his instincts had been right on target. Tristan really was the criminal bad boy his look suggested.

“And so you feel you have to repay him.”

“Right. I mean, he’s been great to me... but I’m just not in love with him, you know?”

She nodded. “All too well. My ex-husband was a lot older than me too. I don’t think we would have had much in common if we stayed together.”

“Russell and I don’t have anything in common. For a while, we had sex. Now...” He shrugged and slid onto the arm of her chair. She caught her breath as he leaned against her, so warm and hard. “Our relationship didn’t even last that long, but he’s having a hard time letting go. And he *hates* it when I talk to girls. I guess because he feels he can’t compete with a woman.”

The solid heat of him was making her dizzy. She wanted to strip him naked and lick every inch of him.

“Oh. I thought you were...”

He slid completely onto her lap. Resting his forehead against hers, his liquid dark eyes stared into her eyes. “Gay? No.” His mouth was nearly touching hers. “No, I love girls.”

She could barely breathe. “Oh, do you now...”

He rubbed her shoulders as his narrow hips began a subtle dance on hers.

Lingeringly, he kissed her neck. “I believe I owe you a lap dance,” he whispered in his Southern drawl.

Almost groaning with arousal, Alexandra succumbed to the spell of Tristan on her lap. His hot mouth traveled over her collarbone in slow and sensual kisses, as his fingers stroked her hair. Pushing his pelvis against hers, he rocked his hard cock against her softness, confirming her wildest hopes. Ex-boyfriend or not, Tristan was definitely attracted to her. He couldn’t be gay. After being in an erotic coma for the last two years, her body was coming alive beneath him.

“You’re so sexy,” she whispered.

He laughed and lightly circled each of her nipples, until their stiffness poked through her sweater.

The office door flung open and slammed against the wall, making them both jump. “You’re on stage in two songs,” another stripper snapped. “Get your ass in gear, Tristan.”

He jumped up, looking disheveled and annoyed. His massive erection was more than obvious. “How could I be up already? I just performed!”

The guy shrugged. “Look, all I know is Russell sent me to get you. He said you’re up.”

Tristan bit his lip, then turned to Alexandra. “Okay, just wait for me. I’ll come find

you after I'm done."

She got up, fumbling in her purse for money. "At least let me pay you for the lap dance."

"What? No way! I owed you for killing your toes." Tristan ran his hands through his hair, looking anxious. "I can't believe Russell knew I was back here. He must have been watching on the hall camera. Dammit—and now I've got to get rid of this." He gestured to his erection.

Alexandra began to feel guilty. The last thing she wanted was for him to get in serious trouble. "At least let me tip you."

"For the last time, no. Look, I'll come find you in twenty minutes. Don't leave the club."

"I won't." She stuffed a twenty dollar bill in his underwear. "Would you quit protesting? Consider it for a future dance."

"Or maybe breakfast." He smiled at her and headed out the door.

Breakfast. Unable to suppress a grin, she smoothed her hair and wandered back to find Nola and Diego. Tonight had gone in a completely unanticipated direction, but she was willing to wait for Tristan. Clearly not much could happen here at the club, under his ex's watchful eye, though. Maybe she should write out her number for him.

She was making her way through the tables when Hunter intercepted her on the club floor. "How about finishing up that lap dance?" He tilted his head and gave her a sexy smile that she suspected had opened the wallets of many customers.

"Actually, I need to get back to my friends." She tried to avoid meeting his blue eyes. Hunter was certainly attractive, but there was no way she was going back to the VIP lounge with him, not after flirting with Tristan. And she was still embarrassed at how eagerly her body had responded to him earlier.

Hunter touched her hair. "The back of your hair is messed up," he said in a knowing voice. "Getting the Tristan show, were we?"

She frowned. "We were talking, yes." She didn't like his tone. And what was *The Tristan Show*?

Hunter shrugged, looking amused. "He's an asshole, but he's damn good at what he does."

That surprised her. "You mean... lap dances?"

"No, convincing people he wants them. That's our real job here, you know; making the customers think they're different and special. That we really do find them sexy." He shrugged again. "I can say that to you because you're a beautiful woman, not some deluded old fart. Let me guess, Tristan gave you a free dance, and yet you paid him anyhow, right? He told you he was in trouble with the boss and made you feel bad, right?"

She felt as if he'd tossed cold water in her face. "I..." But she couldn't find an answer that would preserve her dignity.

Hunter looked philosophical. "Yeah, all the girls like Tristan. He's totally gay, but goddamn, can he pull money out of women. It's a gift. He can get himself hard with anyone, even the ugliest old man. I wish I could do that." He touched her side. "But I only get hard with cuties like you."

She felt sick with humiliation. So the whole scene in the little office had been a set-up, even the interruption and alleged ex-boyfriend issue. "I see. Uh, listen—thanks for

the dance earlier.”

She hurried through the tables to reach Diego and Nola before Tristan took the stage. “I’m feeling nauseous,” she told them without meeting Diego’s eyes. “I hate to cut our night short, but would you mind if we left now?”

Diego stood up immediately, apparently only too happy to comply. “Not at all,” he said forcefully and grabbed their coats. As they left, Alexandra noticed Nola’s wistful look back toward her Latino stripper and a pang of guilt went through her. But she was too miserable over Tristan to care.

Chapter Three

Alexandra stayed in her pajamas late the next morning. Curled up on the sofa, a cup of hot chocolate by her side, she watched the snow fall past her eighth story windows. A light Verdi symphony soothed her from the stereo, but it did little to inspire her. She was too lethargic to move or do anything but pet Pasquale, who purred comfortably by her side. Scheduled to work at noon, she could scarcely imagine putting in a full Saturday shift with her thoughts in such a dither.

Today, several things would undoubtedly happen.

One of them would involve Heidi and the other girls bragging about their boring “couples” dinner party.

Another would involve Diego retaliating by embellishing the story of their night at Heartbreakers, thereby forcing her to relive the entire humiliating night.

And the last was that Tristan would swim around her mind over and over in haunting, repetitive circles.

Get over it, Alexandra. He’s a gay stripper. He worked you over for a good tip, no different from a waiter who tells lame jokes to get you to tip him. You were a walking dollar sign to him.

A deep sigh escaped her. Dammit, why were her hormones so perverse? No man had captured her attention so immediately since her divorce. The only other guy she knew who physically appealed to her like this was Diego. Why did she keep getting attracted to such bad choices?

Of course, *bad* didn’t even cover it with Tristan. Diego at least had a stable job and a good heart, even if he was also a vain Casanova. Tristan, on the hand, was outright dangerous. He worked as a stripper in a seedy gay bar, had admitted to being in trouble with the law, and lied to her about his sexual preference without blinking an eye. From his sexy tattoos and piercings to his hard, cut body, he had *bad boy* written all over him. His slight Southern drawl and boyish smile only made him more of a heartbreaker. And that silver-haired sugar daddy of his hinted at some very seedy ways of making money.

All the same, the tender, sensual way he had touched her... The way he had brushed back her hair and stared into her eyes ... Was that really just the facade of a professional who knew how to put on a show? She couldn’t believe it. There had been genuine sexual chemistry between them. She was sure of it. Why else had her skin prickled with electricity where he touched her? Why else had he gotten so hard?

A deep sigh escaped her as she remembered Hunter’s final words about Tristan forcing erections. She had been so determined to enjoy her night with strippers on a purely eye candy basis, but in the end, her loneliness had made her gullible. Tristan must have laughed himself sick when he got home, remembering how she’d tucked the money in his underwear. Not that twenty dollars was any big deal, but the knowledge of how she’d melted underneath him was just humiliating. No doubt he’d told her to wait for him in the hopes of sucking more out of her in another lap dance.

“It doesn’t matter because you’ll never see him again,” she told herself. “Suck it up and forget about it. And from now on, no more gay bars, no more gay guys, no more gay *anything*. Straight guys only. That’s my new motto.”

She clocked into her shift that afternoon to find Nola was waiting for her. “I have to talk to you about Santiago,” she murmured. “Come see me when you have a second.”

Santiago? That had to be the muscular Latino stripper who’d been grinding on top of her last night. Great. The last thing Alexandra wanted to do was discuss the Heartbreakers dancers. “It’s pretty swamped, Nola.”

“Yes, it certainly is. And you’re late.” Diego’s deep voice cut through the normal Maxwell’s background buzz.

She turned guiltily. Diego was leaning casually against the display case, looking good enough to eat. Dressed in the black that all cosmetics employees wore, his green eyes especially sharp today, he reminded her of a panther. “It’s only two minutes after,” she told him defensively.

“I was just kidding, Lex. Ease up.” He cuffed her arm and walked away.

She exhaled. At least he wasn’t as brittle as he’d been last night. Maybe after sleeping on it, Diego had realized how silly it was to resent the attention she’d gotten from the strippers. Now that they were free of that dark, pulsating club, she realized the obvious—that the strippers probably got the best tips from the most desperate customers. Diego was just too good-looking to seem like he needed to pay for anything. Of course they had ignored him.

Sure enough, he came up behind her when she was testing foundation shades on the jaw of a college student. “Let’s have dinner tonight.”

His mouth was so close to her neck than her skin prickled. “I don’t get off until nine,” she said without looking at him.

“So it’ll be a late dinner.” He squeezed her side. “Don’t invite anyone else.” He wandered off.

What was he up to? First, he offered her a job no one even knew was available; then he got bitter and cold when a couple of strippers paid more attention to her than him; now he was suddenly friendly again and perhaps even... flirtatious. As soon as she finished with her customer, she glanced over her shoulder. Diego was over in the shoe department, talking to the snooty French clerk he’d admired earlier that week. But his eyes were on her.

A disturbing blend of pleasure and trepidation fluttered in her.

“Let’s go on break,” Nola urged in her ear. “I really need your advice about Santiago. He gave me his number!”

That brought Alexandra up short. “Really?” Apparently there were more straight guys than just Hunter working at Heartbreakers.

“Yes! Should I call him? I mean, on the one hand, he’s a stripper—and that’s kind of gross. But on the other hand... oh man, did you see his abs?”

“Stripper? Are you guys talking about last night?” Heidi was suddenly right next to them, her blue eyes cold with disgust. “Please tell me you guys didn’t actually go to that skanky strip club.”

Alexandra paused, trying to think of a good comeback. But what could she say? They *had* gone, and it *had* been kind of skanky.

Luckily, Diego had a response. “Of course we went,” he said, appearing by her side. “It was awesome.”

“Awesome?” Heidi’s nostrils flared.

“Yes. Oh, I don’t think *you* could have handled it, Heidi. You’re not as...

adventurous as Lex and Nola. But the three of us, well, we had all the hot stripper love we could handle.” He looked colludingly at Alexandra. “Personally, I think Tristan was the hottest, but then he paid more attention to you than me.”

Nola caught right on. “Yep, all the boys wanted Lex. Well, except my guy, Santiago.”

“Alexandra! Why would they want her?” Heidi seemed affronted by this. “That strip club is supposed to be gay.”

“The customers might be gay, but not all the boys who work there. And who can blame them?” Diego pulled Alexandra to his side, his hand curving dangerously low around her hip. “Any guy in his right mind would want Lex.”

She struggled not to blush, but the light brush of his fingertips on her butt was impossible to ignore. Only concentrating on Heidi’s outraged face kept her from squirming.

“Yes, it was one wild night,” Diego went on. “We can’t wait to go back. But I’m sure your dinner party was just as exciting—”

“I’m going with you.” Heidi snapped the words as if they were a command. “Seriously. I want to see these strippers who loved Alexandra for myself.” Other makeup artists drifted around in curiosity, and she turned to them. “They went to that gross strip club last night, and apparently, the guys were all over Alexandra and Nola.”

“Eww,” said one of the girls, but another one looked excited.

“Really? Did they get totally naked?”

A cold trepidation grew in Alexandra as more makeup artists wandered over. Customers were left in the lurch as the words *lap dance* and *naked* and *cute* echoed through the department. Alexandra’s anxiety rose higher and higher until she heard the word she’d been dreading: *tonight*.

“Cool,” Heidi said with satisfaction. A cluster of shoppers had gathered around the new display, but for once she was ignoring them. “We’ll all meet down there late tonight. Eleven o’clock.”

Nola’s face was radiant, as if she were bursting with the desire to flaunt Santiago. “Glad you guys are coming. And I *know* Lex is dying to see Tristan again.”

Diego shot her a sharp look, but Alexandra mustered her composure. “You know it. I can’t stop thinking about him,” she said in her sexiest voice. That much was true at least.

Diego’s green eyes turned to ice. “You know the strippers are all gay, Lex,” he muttered in her ear as the other makeup artists dispersed. “They just pretend to be straight to get your money.”

She smiled sweetly. “But they didn’t *want* my money, Diego. All my dances were free.”

She laughed to herself as she headed off to help a customer. She knew that retort had gotten Diego where it hurt, and she was glad. Why was he acting so competitive?

Yet as her shift went on, confusion overwhelmed all other thoughts. After thinking she would never see Tristan again in her life, she’d be seeing him in a matter of hours. No doubt he thought she was just another dumb customer, a wide-eyed female who would willingly feed cash into his underwear. Well, she wasn’t going to give him a dime tonight. Nor would she pay him one jot of attention. In fact, she almost looked forward to ignoring him, just to show him how little he affected her.

All the same, the thought of him naked on Heidi’s lap made her feel sick to her

stomach. She knew it was just a job, and that she had no claim on him, but for a few minutes last night he'd made her feel special and desired for the first time in ages. If Heidi or the other girls hired him for a lap dance, she didn't know if she could stand to watch it.

Despite a constant influx of customers, the rest of her shift seemed to drag. Lipsticks, foundation and makeup pencils went off in shiny black Maxwell's bags in a steady flow, but she didn't bother calculating her commissions for the day. Even when old Mrs. Levinson wandered in and sweetly requested to try on some face cream, Alexandra's mind vacillated between two thoughts: a certain strip club down on the waterfront and her dinner date with Diego that night. In less than a day, she had gone from her usually daily boring routine to the most unpredictable and romantically promising night she'd had in years. Yet her obsessive thoughts provided no answers, only more questions.

The rush ended around seven o'clock as the customers went home to prepare for their Saturday night plans. Alexandra and the remaining makeup artists began cleaning up the discarded testers, used cotton balls and discarded receipts. Her stomach was in a knot over both her plans for the night: dinner with Diego at nine, meeting at Heartbreakers at eleven. Much as she wanted time alone with Diego, she knew she'd be too nervous to eat a bite.

As it turned out, she didn't need to worry. Diego pulled her aside before he left the store at eight. "Looks like we won't have time for dinner," he said casually. "Since we're going to the club later, I need to go home and shower."

Of course. Naturally primping to impress the boys of Heartbreakers was more important than a dinner alone with her. "As you wish." She refused to show her disappointment.

He paused. "I'm definitely going to get with that Tristan tonight."

A small flame of jealousy seared her heart. *Get with* could mean he intended to buy a lap dance from him, or it could mean he intended to actually hook up with him. Either way, she was angry and hurt. Once again, Diego preferred chasing after a cute new boy to spending time with her. And this time it was a boy she wanted.

"I saw him first," she said lightly.

Diego gave her a smile brutal in its confidence. "Yes, but you're a woman... and according to my sources, he likes men."

He walked out of the store whistling a triumphant tune.

Late that night, she and Nola shared a cab to Heartbreakers. Diego could find his own way there, she thought nastily. This time she had a slight advantage; Nola had texted her own stripper, Santiago, who promised to set aside a reserved table up front for just them. Diego, Heidi and the other girls would have to find their own table in the back.

As their cab pulled up, she was dismayed to see everyone waiting out front.

"Oh, this is so exciting!" Heidi giggled as they paid the cover charge. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

Alexandra wanted to snidely ask where all of their boyfriends thought they were tonight. Apparently, while Heidi's dinner party was only for couples, strip clubs weren't only for singles.

That nervous anticipation rose up in her blood as she headed into the club. A loud hip hop song was crashing through the speakers, and the darkness made it hard to see at first. The stripper on stage wasn't one she recognized. As Nola tugged her forward

toward their waiting table, a different hand grabbed her wrist. She whirled around, ready to tell Hunter to back off.

Instead she met Tristan's dark eyes.

They stared at each other. He released his grip on her wrist and trailed his fingers instead down her palm. She couldn't find her voice. He leaned forward.

"Didn't think you'd come back."

And I'm sure you're thrilled, she thought skeptically. Her eyes had adjusted to the club darkness now, and she could see the owner, his silver-haired sugar daddy, watching them from another table. "I didn't want to," she informed him coolly. "Our coworkers made us come back."

He smiled that sweet, little-boy smile and began tugging her toward the VIP lounge. "I believe we got interrupted last night."

"Sorry. I don't have any money tonight."

Instead of the disinterest she expected, he only looked hurt. "And you don't need any. Come on."

Okay. She would play along with his *but I actually like you* game. Besides, the other girls were watching in stunned amazement, and their expressions were too enjoyable. Alexandra followed him back to the black curtain. To her surprise, he led her past it to a table in the darkest corner of the club.

"More privacy here." He smiled. He escorted her into a chair like a gentleman, then swung onto her lap.

The immediate closeness of him jolted her senses. She fidgeted away, determined not to respond to him so obviously tonight.

He tenderly pushed her hair back. "So," he murmured, with a beginning kiss on her ear. "Why'd you take off last night?"

"I was bored."

He pulled back and looked curiously at her. "Did I piss you off or something?"

She kept her face neutral. Indifferent, the way he actually felt about her. "No, why?"

He studied her eyes, then sank back into his dance. His lips drifted over her earlobe, biting it so softly she wasn't sure if it had happened. Firmly, he massaged her shoulders and neck, working his fingers in soothing circles that dissolved her anger like magic. She'd dressed more casually tonight in tight jeans and a clingy red sweater, and he seemed to appreciate it, running his hands up and down her sides. Cradling her hair in his hands, he whispered, "You're so my type, Alexandra."

Yes, he definitely knew his trade, she thought. Almost grudgingly, she touched his pierced nipples, enjoying the way they stiffened beneath her fingers. But it was hard to maintain her detachment as he slipped his hands beneath her sweater. Just the touch of his fingertip stroking her stomach filled her blood with fire. Nor could she ignore the swollen, straight rise of his erection, which now prodded through his cotton underwear.

"Come on... Tell me. You're so stiff tonight. What happened?"

"Nothing happened," she insisted. Nervously, she glanced over her shoulder.

"Did Russell say something to you? Listen, he doesn't own me—"

"It wasn't Russell."

He pulled back and looked closely at her. "So someone did say something. Who?"

She sighed. "Hunter."

Tristan scowled. "That asshole is always trying to bring me down. What did he say

to you?”

It was difficult to get the words out. “That you’re totally gay and you scam the female customers into thinking you want them, so they tip you better.”

Tristan slid his arms around her neck again. “Hunter was the number one earner before I came along,” he told her. “He also used to be the pick of the women customers until I started, and he’s a little bitter about that.” He took Alexandra’s hand and guided it to his underwear. She sucked in her breath as he wrapped her fingers around his cock. “Look, you can feel the effect you have on me. I don’t want your money... I just want you.”

The feel of his hot, swollen cock in her hand unlocked her emotions. Suddenly, Tristan was no longer just a pretty lust object but a real man, a man who could break her open and push her into hot-blooded, irrational fever. She yanked her hand back, desperate to regain control.

He pulled her chin toward him. “Are you attracted to me?” he murmured, his lips brushing hers.

She nodded helplessly. “I don’t want to be, but I am...” An electric tension was rising in her blood and spreading through her body, demanding sexual attention.

“Then give in to it—and I’ll make you the most satisfied woman in the world.” He softly bit her lips, sending a shiver down her spine.

Tristan leaned back with that impish smile. Never taking his eyes from hers, he pushed down his underwear and let his cock spring free.

Alexandra swallowed hard. She hadn’t seen him naked last night, but she had imagined his cock in vivid detail after going home. Now it was hard and begging for attention right in front of her. Biting her lip, she ran one finger up his shaft. His cock was as pretty as he was, long, silky and perfectly shaped. Groaning softly, she gave him a frustrated squeeze. If only they were alone together.

With a quick glance around for intrusions, Tristan gently lifted up the underwire of her bra and freed her breasts under her top.

Alexandra could scarcely breathe as he ran his thumbs over her hard nipples. Never did she think she would let anyone touch her in public like this, let alone a stranger who did this for a living. Yet she arched her back against the chair and thrust her breasts invitingly forward as he kissed the stiff points of her nipples through her sweater. A long, hungry moan escaped her. It had been too long, way too long since a man touched her breasts as his hard cock grew stiffer with excitement.

With another quick check around their dark little corner of the club, Tristan slid his cock under her sweater. Stroking her nipples one more time, he closed the soft pillows of her breasts around his shaft.

Conflicting currents of shame and excitement soared through Alexandra. “Tristan...”

She struggled to find the willpower to stop. Part of her wanted him to put his hands and cock all over her. The other part was screaming inside her head that she was a respectable woman who would never let a stranger play with her breasts in public.

“I wish we were alone,” he murmured in her ear. “God, I want to fuck you.”

A sensation like warm honey was dampening her panties. She wanted to drag him into the nearest closet and ravish him. Squeezing her breasts around his cock, Tristan moaned into her hair, his palpable frustration unlocking her desire. Then he slipped back down and positioned his cock between her legs. With a natural ferocity and rhythm, they

began to grind together, the friction firing the heat in her blood hotter and hotter. Together their bodies coupled and rocked together until wet, blinding heat swept through her, and she clung to Tristan with all her might as his cock rubbed against her.

“Um, *hello?*”

The deep, angry voice made both of them jump. Alexandra hastily adjusted her bra and sweater before she took in the intimidating sight of Diego towering over them. Tristan tucked his erection back into his underwear, a guilty look on his face.

“Is this dance over?” Diego snapped. Even in the club darkness, his green eyes shot sparks of hostility. “Because I think it’s my turn for a lap dance from you. Now. Or should I see the manager?”

“No... No, you can have a dance.” Tristan’s face was a map of frustration and fear. Alexandra knew he could get in trouble for what they had just done. As much as he might want to continue, he had to placate Diego. “We were just finishing up.”

Alexandra rose. Diego’s eyes were like ice, but she refused to cower before him. How dare he judge her for this after all these months of mocking her prolonged celibacy? “Be my guest,” she told him coolly.

He threw himself in the chair, his eyes flickering between the two of them. “Great.” He pulled out sixty bucks. “It’s twenty bucks a dance, right? And one dance is a song? Good, then I want three.” He rudely pushed the money into Tristan’s underwear.

Three dances. Three songs. That was a hell of a long time for him to work his own sex magic on Tristan. Goddammit. How dare he? Diego knew she liked Tristan—and he could hardly call him gay after what he’d just witnessed. Yet her only graceful option was to walk away.

“Have fun,” Alexandra said through gritted teeth and headed to the bathroom.

In the ladies room, she stared at herself. Her nipples were so hard they ached, and her black wavy hair was wildly disheveled. Her pale eyes glittered with arousal. This was no longer a flirtation, or a fantasy, or a game. She had to have Tristan. Maybe he was dangerous, maybe she was a fool, maybe she was falling for the oldest trick in the book. But she had to take the risk. She knew he wanted her; that tension between them definitely could not be faked. His body belonged to her—he’d made that clear.

Unless Diego somehow tempted him otherwise.

Frowning, she headed back into the club. Yes, their lap dance was still going on. Silhouetted in that dark corner against the faint flow of a single red bulb, they looked incredibly erotic together—Diego so tall and suave and well-dressed, looking exactly like the former international model he was, with the younger Tristan on his lap, all piercings and tattoos and rumpled hair. Alexandra took a deep breath, overwhelmed with a wave of emotion that was as much desire as jealousy.

Heidi grabbed her arm. “I hate it here,” she announced bitterly. “Where are all these straight strippers you guys talked about? No one’s paying any attention to us.”

Alexandra tried not to smirk. “Hmmm, I can’t imagine why. Just pick out your favorite and ask for a dance.”

“I’m not going to pay for a dance! Diego said you got your dances for free. Why can’t I?”

Alexandra squinted into the stage lights. Yep, that big muscular stripper on stage with the flawless tanned skin was the one she’d seen with Nola last night. Santiago. He was smiling at her now. Good. Maybe she and Nola could both have naughty stripper

adventures.

"I don't know what to tell you, Heidi," she said. Just then a very different stripper caught her eye: Hunter. Looking just as blond and buff as he had last night, he was grinding away on a white-haired man's lap at a table. But his gaze was firmly locked on her. "Look, I'll see what I can do. Go back to the table and wait for me."

She headed to the bar and ordered a new bottle of seltzer, knowing that Hunter would follow as soon as his lap dance ended. Sure enough, he appeared at her side, just as she was paying. "I knew you couldn't stay away from me."

He tickled her side, making her laugh despite herself. She squirmed away and forced herself to adopt an angry tone. "You lied to me about Tristan last night. He's not gay."

Hunter barely blinked. "All's fair in love and war," he said brazenly. "Can you blame me if I wanted you for myself?"

She snorted. "You just wanted to sabotage Tristan. It's obvious you two are rivals. Look—you owe me. That table of girls over there is feeling ignored. Will you give one of them a dance and let her think it's free?"

"Absolutely. All you need to do is come to the VIP lounge with me." His gaze traveled down her body and up again with open lust.

"I don't think so," she told him dryly. "Come on, Hunter. It's the least you can do."

"But that's just it. I'd rather do so much more." He pulled her against him and put his mouth to her ear. "Tristan's boyfriend owns this place. He's not going to be happy about Tristan picking up on a customer. Why don't you stick with me? You know we're good together." He slipped his hand between her legs and tickled her.

She pushed him away. "In your dreams." But the truth was that his touch sent an electrifying jolt through her blood, stoking the fire Tristan had started. Damn him and his arrogant ways. Alexandra walked away quickly before he could touch her again and completely undo her resolve. Where the hell were Diego and Tristan, anyway? At least three songs had finished. That meant their lap dance was done, right?

Her answer came when she saw Diego sauntering across the club, a self-satisfied smile she knew all too well on his face. Oh great. What had happened between them? For the first time, it occurred to her that she had left Tristan in a highly aroused state—hot and bothered, with a very hard cock. Had Diego exploited that?

"Thanks for warming him up for me," he yawned. "That boy is a pistol, isn't he?"

She didn't even want to know what that meant. "That was really rude of you, cutting in on us like that," Alexandra snapped. "You could tell we were having a good time."

"Not as good a time as we just did." He grinned brazenly.

That bastard. She knew better than to ask what had happened—he would only insinuate all kinds of things to upset her. "I need a drink."

She headed alone to the bar. The bartender handed her a glass of bubbling seltzer and waved away her money. "Tristan said you're drinking on the house."

Well, that was nice. She glanced over at their table, where Hunter was indeed giving Heidi and another girl a joint lap dance. They were giggling madly. Despite his cocky ways, apparently he did have a generous side. Alexandra noted that Nola was sitting alone, while Santiago led another man to the VIP lounge. Nola didn't look upset, though.

Someone touched her arm; she turned hopefully, but it was a cute young Asian stripper she didn't recognize. "Tristan said to meet him in the parking lot in ten minutes," he said. "But if you see him on the floor right now, don't talk to him."

No doubt this had something to do with his possessive ex-boyfriend, Russell.
“Okay.”

Jubilation raced through her. Apparently Diego hadn’t stolen his affections after all.

Alexandra headed back to the restroom and touched up her lip gloss, brushing her hair until all signs of their wild lap dance were gone. Then she headed out, shivering, into the cold winter night.

A curving gibbous moon hung alone in the sky. There were no stars visible tonight, not down here on the waterfront, where the urban light pollution canceled them out. She huddled nervously in her sweater, wondering if this quiet parking lot was a safe place to be.

“Alexandra.” She turned, seeing no one. “Over by the dumpster.”

She rounded the corner to find Tristan shivering and shirtless in a pair of black leather pants. “Sorry to lure you out here. But this is the only place the cameras don’t reach.”

“Cameras?” She’d never even thought about that.

“There’s twenty-seven alone inside the club. They monitor everything we do, and the parking lot too. Partly for safety reasons, and partly to track our dances.”

She frowned. “Why would they do that?”

“Because we have to pay the club twenty percent of our take every night. They don’t like us giving out free dances and—well, to be honest, they don’t like us paying too much attention to women. It upsets the men. They like to think we’re all gay.” Tristan brushed a black lock of hair from her cheek. “Look, Russell—my ex—is already on the warpath over you. He knows I’m bi, and he always gets a little jumpy when a pretty woman comes into the club. And he can tell I’m attracted to you.”

The words filled her up like warm honey. She couldn’t wait to tell Diego how wrong he was about Tristan’s orientation. “But the lap dance we just had... wasn’t that on camera?”

“Not in that corner. I mean, partially it was, but they couldn’t see the good stuff.” A crooked smile made him look extra cute. “Look, I want to take you out for breakfast at this all-night diner when I get off. Will you wait?”

“Sure.” She’d normally be long in bed when he got off work, but that was okay. She’d meet him anywhere, anytime.

The back door opened. “Tristan!” someone yelled.

“Shit. I’m up. Wait around this time, okay? Don’t go.” He looked forlorn, his dark eyes beseeching her to stay.

“I won’t.”

She waited a few minutes before walking back inside. Back at the table, Nola introduced her to Santiago and told her they’d all been invited to hit an all-night cafe after the strippers got off work. Alexandra sighed as she realized she and Tristan once again would not be alone. But that was okay. She knew he liked her, and that was what mattered. Eventually they would have a date, just the two of them.

An hour later, Heartbreakers finally shut down. Snow had begun to fall as all of them took cabs back downtown to an old-fashioned diner with a black and white checkered parquet floor and lacquered tables. Ten of them showed up: Nola, Santiago, Alexandra, Diego, Tristan, two of the makeup artists and three other strippers. Alexandra was amused to note that Heidi had gone home in a pique over being ignored. To her surprise,

Hunter had also declined the invitation. His excuse was that he had an early day skiing planned, but Alexandra suspected that he was genuinely miffed over her flirtation with Tristan.

Much to Alexandra's displeasure, Diego took the seat next to her, forcing Tristan to sit across from them.

And he was clearly gunning for bear. "So Tristan, that older man you were talking to tonight, is that your boyfriend?"

"Ex," Tristan said. He didn't seem self-conscious about his love life, and Alexandra liked that about him. "He owns the club, actually, and a few others around town."

"Ah." Diego shot Alexandra a significant look, as if to say, *See, I told you he was gay*. "Did you meet him on the job?"

"No. I met him last year after I..." A strange look crossed his face. Quickly Tristan went on, "I was having a hard time finding a job, so he suggested I work there. Obviously, I don't want to do it forever, but right now, it's really paying off."

"No surprise there." Diego gave him a seductive smile. "You're the best stripper at Heartbreakers. That was the hottest lap dance I've ever had."

To Alexandra's fury, Tristan actually blushed and looked down. That wasn't a good sign. What the hell had happened between them? Had he fallen for Diego, like every other man in existence? She would kill Diego if he took Tristan away from her. *Kill him*. After all these lonely months, she finally had a chance for something fun and sweet, an erotic renewal of sorts. Maybe Tristan wasn't long-term relationship material, but he could fulfill the kind of fantasy she'd never had the courage to chase. So Diego just had to step aside. He could have any man or woman he wanted, after all. It wasn't fair if he seduced Tristan too.

At the same time, she wanted to hear more about *last year*. What kind of legal trouble had he been in? If it was something violent, that would change everything. "What were you doing for work before this?" she asked bluntly.

Tristan's dark eyes filled with unhappiness. "Not much," he muttered, opening a menu.

Uh oh. Clearly he was hiding something. She and Diego exchanged a look of mutual trepidation, their rivalry momentarily forgotten.

Much to Alexandra's chagrin, the waitress took their order. Now she'd never find out Tristan's criminal past. She studied him as he moodily ordered a plate of home fries and an omelet. Just the mention of last year seemed to put him in a funk. Yet as she tried to think of a diplomatic way to bring it up again, a contemptuous female voice cut across the table.

"Private Schroeder," the woman drawled. "Fancy meeting you here."

Private? This had to be a joke. Alexandra and Diego exchanged another bewildered look as Tristan got to his feet and shook the woman's hand. She was in her late thirties, a pretty redhead who looked a little bleary at this late hour. Her eyes ran up and down him in a coldly sexual assessment.

"I'm not enlisted anymore, ma'am," he said. His shoulders were squared, but the rigid set of his jaw revealed a bristling tension. "You're Sergeant Green's wife, right?"

"Ex-wife." She stared meaningfully at him as disgust spread over her features. "And that's right, I believe I heard about your problems. Dishonorable discharge, am I right? I was so *disappointed* in you."

Tristan's lips went white. "No, you are not right. I received a General Discharge."

The silence that fell over the table bristled with unspoken hostility. Finally, the woman's date appeared and gently pressed her arms. "Well," she said. "It appears we're both out of the military now." She looked down the table at all of them and smiled tightly. "Good luck, Private Schroeder. You're going to need it."

She swept out with her date.

Tristan slowly took his seat. His face was a brooding map of misery. Alexandra felt deeply sorry for him at that moment. Yet her mind raced with questions. Tristan had been in the military? It just didn't seem possible. Not with those tattooed biceps and pierced nipples, not with that slow, sexy saunter of his...

"Well, now you know what I was doing before Heartbreakers," he said tersely. "I was deployed in Iraq until last summer. And I don't want to talk about it."

"Of course," Diego said. He was fascinated by this revelation, Alexandra could tell, but for now he was playing the understanding pal. "Two of my cousins in Brazil are in the military, and they are very tight-lipped about it."

"Oh, are you from Brazil?" Tristan seemed relieved to change the subject. "You don't have an accent..."

"I left when I was fifteen."

"That was a long time ago," Alexandra said snidely. She knew it was mean, but she wanted to derail Diego's launch into his *I was a famous model* story.

It didn't work. After shooting her a dirty look, he told Tristan the story she'd heard so many times—how he'd been discovered by an agent in high school, how his German and South American ancestry had given him a unique look that soon had him traveling all over the world doing fashion shows and photo shoots. He was blunt about his success and blunt about his failures after cocaine ruined his life. "Male models don't really become household names like some girls do, but it was such an addictive lifestyle. I miss it sometimes, but I figure I had the best of both worlds—the excitement and the fun, and then the lessons learned."

"That's an amazing story," Tristan said. He seemed deeply impressed, to Alexandra's dismay. "You're only what, twenty-eight? And yet you've lived enough for five people."

"I'm thirty-two and thanks. Yeah, I feel like a life lived down on the farm isn't worth living, you know? I mean, look at you—you joined the military, saw the world, served your country in a war. Now you're working as a stripper and having an experience everyone's curious about. You're grabbing life with both hands."

Alexandra wanted to kill him. She knew exactly what he was doing—setting her up to look like the boring former suburban wife she was. But what could she say? It was true: both Tristan and Diego had lived exciting, unusual lives. Her life was as bland as a vanilla wafer in comparison.

Predictably, Tristan turned politely to her. "How about you, Alexandra? What do you do for a living?"

She caught Diego's vindictive smile before she answered. "I'm a makeup artist at Maxwell's. So is Diego." That didn't have quite the same cachet as *model*, she knew.

"Actually I'm more of an executive at the brand company she works for," Diego clarified. He shot her a dagger look.

"Executive?" Alexandra laughed. "You travel around to different stores dropping off

product and training the artists.”

Tristan seemed to sense the hostility rising between them. “Oh, so that’s how you know each other?”

“Yep.” Neither of them looked at each other as their food was served.

Two of the other strippers kept them entertained with stories of bizarre customers while they ate. Alexandra was hungry, yet every time she glanced up to face Tristan’s boyish smile, or meet his dark eyes, her stomach jumped around too wildly to eat. At last she pushed her plate away. All she really wanted was this dead-of-the-night breakfast to end so she could finally be alone with him. She lived only three blocks away; if he walked her home, she could invite him in.

Of course, Diego had no intention of letting that happen. After they paid the bill and walked outside, everyone began to hail different cabs. Diego turned to Alexandra. “I’ll walk you home since you live so close.”

She glared at him. “Thanks, but that’s okay.”

“No,” he said icily, “I insist.”

Tristan rubbed her arms, smiling. “You look pretty cold to me, but I’ll walk with you if you don’t want to take a cab.”

Snow was still falling down over the city streets. Whenever she glanced up at the streetlamps, the dizzying swirl of snowflakes made Alexandra feel like she was in a dream. If only it was just the two of them—either her and Tristan or, on a different night, her and Diego. *Three’s a crowd*, she told Diego silently in her mind. *Bug off. He likes me, not you.* Yet she wasn’t entirely sure this was true. Diego’s stories in the diner had clearly captured Tristan’s attention. She knew too well Diego’s effect on men—hell, on women too; the way his feline green eyes and dazzling smile could eclipse everyone else in the room. Diego knew it wasn’t enough to coast on his natural handsomeness—he had a charisma that he wielded effectively as a weapon. Everything from his height to his broad shoulders to his luxurious black hair grabbed attention and promised a mother lode of mind-blowing sex.

“So.” Tristan sounded shy as he looked at the sidewalk. “How come you guys aren’t asking me about my discharge from the Army?”

Alexandra frowned in confusion. Diego looked just as puzzled. “You said it wasn’t dishonorable,” she said gently. “Or did I misunderstand?”

“It wasn’t honorable, either,” Tristan said. “A general discharge isn’t good. It carries a stigma, and there can be consequences, from benefits to getting a job. Anyhow... I just didn’t want you to think I had done something bad.”

“So what did you do?” Diego asked directly. Alexandra secretly appreciated his candor.

Tristan wiped melting snowflakes from his cheek. “Can’t you guess? I fell in love with a straight guy in my unit. We... had a relationship. And when some other guys caught on, he lied and said I’d been coming on to him, pestering him day and night. Next thing I know my CO—my commanding officer—is making my life a living hell.”

Now Alexandra understood his vague talk about running into trouble with the law. “And Russell, the club owner, helped you out?” she asked delicately.

“You got it. I’d met him one night in the club on leave, and I remembered him telling me about all the closeted guys he knew in the military. Some pretty high up. So when the shit hit the fan, I called him, and apparently he pulled the right strings because he’s the

only reason I didn't get a dishonorable discharge."

"You mean, he blackmailed the right people," Diego said bluntly.

"I guess." Tristan sighed. "Anyhow, we started dating when I got out, and because I wasn't really qualified to do much else, he gave me a job at Heartbreakers. And now here I am."

Alexandra tried to think of the right thing to say. She realized how choiceless he must have felt all these last months, betrayed by his lover, stripped of his military career, then pulled into a relationship with a much older man who was still possessively in love with him and trying to control his income. It had to be difficult. She had felt that same helplessness at the end of her marriage.

"You're a great stripper," Diego assured him. "But if you want to start a whole new life, you can do it. I had to do it once."

"So did I," Alexandra reminded them.

Tristan smiled gratefully at them. "Well, you two can be my role models then."

You two. Great, he was starting to think of them as a package deal. That was the last thing she wanted. To her dismay, she realized they had almost reached her building. That would leave the two of them to finish the night alone together after she went inside.

"Um... this is where I live." She tried desperately to think of a way to break the two of them apart. She couldn't invite one in and not the other; that would be rude. Yet she couldn't let them go home together either.

"Cool. I'll catch a cab then," Tristan said.

No, don't go, she silently begged. *Ask for my number. Don't just walk away.*

"So listen, what are you guys doing next Friday?" he asked. "The club is holding a stripper auction—kind of like a bachelor auction, but with the guys at Heartbreakers." He smiled. "It's for some anti-hunger foundation. You don't have to bid or anything, but it would be cool if you came down."

Alexandra and Diego said in unison, "We'll be there."

"Cool." Spotting an approaching taxi, he quickly gave them the name of the venue. Then he hailed the cab, shouted goodbye and rode off.

Diego leaned against the railing of her building steps, his long coat open to the falling snow, and stared wordlessly at her. Alexandra hated his good looks and smooth confidence at that moment. She knew exactly what he was thinking—that the game was on, and he intended to win.

"Two days ago I would have said I know who you are," he said. "Now, I'm not so sure."

He turned and walked off under the streetlights before she could ask what that meant. Because the truth was that she wasn't so sure now that she knew him either.

Chapter Four

On Monday, Alexandra woke up feeling rested and confident. She'd spent most of Sunday in bed, dreaming blissful dreams of dark red rooms and the naked boys who haunted them, then awakening to sleepily question why she was so happy. Then she would remember: Tristan. Just the memory of him grinding on top of her, his hair hanging boyishly in his eyes while his erect cock pressed against her, sent a shower of sparks through her body. The way his long, sensual fingers had touched her, his simple, sad confession about his doomed Army affair as they walked home. After this long stretch of romantic solitude, could she really have met a man who made her feel alive again?

Be real, Alexandra. You're talking about a stripper here. He's too young, he's already gotten in trouble in the Army, and now things are complicated with his ex-boyfriend and boss. And besides—he is way too cute. Out of your league. Enjoy the flirtation for what it is and move on.

It was sound thinking. And, if she had a healthy love life with other romantic options, she might have followed it. The problem was that no one else had ignited her body or her heart like this. For the last year—she could admit this now—Diego had been the focus of her secret longings and daydreams. He was just so sexy, so magnetic, so flirtatious. Yet she'd always stayed logical and cool in her resolve to hide her feelings. They were just friends, no matter how many casual sexual offers he laughingly flung her way. Tristan, on the other hand, was different. He might be bad news, but he openly wanted her with an intensity that made her feel swooningly desirable. After being dumped by her husband, that was heady stuff indeed. She'd always assumed the next man to want her would be some stable, semi-boring guy in his thirties... not a wild boy like Tristan.

As she dressed for work Monday, her thoughts returned to Diego. Yes, he was clearly as attracted to Tristan as she was. And god knows what had actually transpired during their lap dance. But now that a few days had passed, she was sure she could persuade him to bow out. He could—and frequently did—enjoy the sexual attentions of anyone he wanted. He didn't need to add Tristan to his list of conquests, not when Tristan was the one guy she'd fallen for since her divorce. Surely, if she talked to him seriously about this, he would be reasonable.

She wasn't sure when she would get the chance. Diego only spent one week a month at their store, so he wasn't expected back that week. Yet to her surprise, he strolled into Maxwell's shortly after lunch.

"What are you doing here?" Heidi asked stiffly. She had been in an odd mood all day. Alexandra assumed she was still grumpy over being ignored at Heartbreakers.

"Dropping off these promotional posters. We're holding a Color event next month, so start hyping it to customers and signing them up now." He dropped the box on the counter.

A Color event was when celebrity makeup artists flew in to do makeovers. Alexandra didn't really consider them any more skilled than the normal artists who worked the counter, but they had famous clients who gave them added credibility in the

eyes of the customers. She cut open the box and removed the posters without comment.

Diego stretched restlessly. "I'll be back next week too to set up the Valentine's display." He turned to Alexandra. "Feel like going on break?"

She tried to read his eyes as they headed out to the mall cafe for cappuccinos, but his handsome face was deliberately neutral. She assumed this was about her promotion; he hadn't mentioned it since last week. His silence had made her anxious. She wanted this job, wanted both the professional growth and the extra money.

His first words took her entirely by surprise. "I don't think we should go to that stripper auction Friday night."

She blinked. Of course they were going to the auction. That was her only excuse to see Tristan again.

"Uh—why?" It occurred to her that he must have been thinking about it all day yesterday. He certainly hadn't needed to come in here today; those posters easily could have been put in the mail. He must really be afraid of this ruining their friendship.

Or he had realized that Tristan preferred her and didn't want to lose face.

"Because it's not a healthy environment for you, Lex. I realize now I never should have taken you to Heartbreakers this past weekend. You're not used to that kind of thing, and when I saw how it went to your head, I blamed myself."

A slow indignation spread through her. "Went to my *head*?" She felt so insulted she could barely find the words to speak. "What are you talking about? And stop treating me like a helpless little girl."

He leaned forward, his green eyes urgent. "You were completely out of character. One lap dance after another with different strippers? Letting yourself get felt up by total strangers? That is not you, and we both know it."

"Oh, for god's sake." She shoved her chair back and stood up. Only the real angst etched across his face stopped her from responding with a retort so nasty he'd never forget it. "Thanks for trying to shame me about the only fun I've had since my divorce. Remind me again how many people you've hooked up with since we met?"

"That's me—I can handle it. And there haven't been that many, for the record."

She picked up her purse. "You've gone mental over this whole strip club thing. *You're* the one who can't handle it." She shot him a cold look. "I notice you haven't even mentioned my promotion. Or is that out the window now that I've displeased you?"

He shoved his own chair back, never taking his eyes from hers. "Of course not. I'm still recommending you, and it's yours if you want it. The position will be officially announced Thursday."

She relaxed a little. Not that her friendship with Diego wasn't important, but she did need to be pragmatic. Living paycheck to paycheck had taught her that.

Neither said a word as they walked back to the cosmetics department. But when Diego left, he sought her out once more. "Look, it's your choice. But I won't be at that skanky auction, and I don't think you should go either."

She didn't see him for the rest of the week. At night she hunted online until she found the details of the auction. It was called "A Strip to Remember" and it was an annual event hosted by local strip clubs for a different charity each year. The participants bid on a "date" with each stripper, but it wasn't a private date like she'd supposed. Instead local businesses had donated services and goods, such as tickets to a basketball game, a day at the spa, a private plane ride, and so on. It sounded like a lot of fun, she

thought. It would actually be a much more wholesome event than a typical night at Heartbreakers, so what was Diego so afraid of?

Nola assured her that she would accompany her. “Santiago is getting auctioned off as a part of a date at the planetarium,” she said. “Supposedly they’ll serve a private dinner for two alone while they watch the star show.”

“I wonder how much people will bid,” Alexandra mused.

“He said that last year the dates went for hundreds of dollars apiece. I mean, not only are the dates fun stuff, but all the strippers have customers that would love to spend some personal time with them.”

Alexandra glumly wondered how many people would compete for a date with Tristan.

On Thursday, Lynette announced her resignation and the availability of her position. Alexandra maintained a respectful silence, though she didn’t miss the baleful looks Heidi shot her. They both knew they were each other’s competition for this job.

Yet Alexandra was too consumed with nervous thoughts of Tristan to care. What would he say to her at the auction? She couldn’t afford to bid, and she hoped he understood that. If nothing else, she could give him her phone number. The important thing was that Diego wouldn’t be around to distract him.

On Friday evening, she searched as frantically through her closet as she had the previous weekend. She’d bought new lingerie, just in case she did get him alone tonight. Now she stood in matching lavender panties and bra, trying to find the perfect outfit to wow him.

The ring of the doorbell took her by surprise. It was way too early for Nola to come over. Pulling on a black satin robe, Alexandra ran to the door.

Diego filled up its frame, looming over her with an intensely brooding look.

She couldn’t find the right words. Feeling vulnerable, she clutched her robe around her. “Come in,” she said finally.

We can be civil about this, she thought. She fixed him a club soda and a vodka tonic for herself, then sat down on the couch next to him. He was dressed in a dark designer suit, hair swept back, as if he were impersonating a businessman for a photo shoot. That told her exactly what his plans were for the night.

She sipped her drink nervously. “So I guess you changed your mind.”

His eyes traveled over her bare legs. “And I guess you didn’t, since you’re still not dressed. You only try on a dozen different outfits when you’re excited about going out.”

She didn’t bother to hide her impatience. “Diego, what is the big deal about this? You’re acting like my father or something. What do you care if I hook up with Tristan? You’re the one always goading me to get laid.”

He began to respond, but his eyes dropped to her chest. She realized her robe had fallen open slightly, giving him an excellent view of her lace bra. She refused to fix it. Let him remember that she was a woman with sexual needs.

He dragged his gaze upwards and shot her an incredulous look. “Give me a break, Alexandra. You, dating a bisexual stripper? You’re the ultimate good girl, and you know it.”

Never had she been so insulted. She leaned forward, letting her robe drop open until her barely concealed breasts were on full display. “*Good girl!* Listen, just because I’m not some ex-cokehead model who slutted his way around the world—”

“You don’t know anything about my past,” Diego growled. His eyes were tugged between her skimpy bra and her face. “Yeah, a long time ago I had a drug problem. But those days are behind me, and they’re not the sum total of who I am as a person. And you know what? The truth is I did see a lot of things. Things that make me a much better match for Tristan’s world than you could ever be.”

She knew he was right about that. The world of gay strip clubs was as alien to her experience as Siberia. That fact just made her angrier. She swallowed her drink and slammed down the glass.

“And who says he wants someone from that world?” she asked cuttingly. “You may fit in more with his crowd than I do, but maybe he wants something different.”

“Maybe.” Diego’s cool green eyes ran up and down her body. “But it’s what *you* want that I’m questioning, Lex. I’ve known you for a year now, and you’ve dodged every straight guy that even smiles at you. There’s a reason you hang out with me at gay bars all the time, because you’re terrified of putting your heart on the chopping block again. So when you tell me you’re comfortable dating a bisexual stripper—sorry, but I’m not buying it.”

She hated him for pinpointing her fears so accurately. “Maybe I was scared for a while,” she said after a moment. “But maybe I just never met anyone I liked enough to take the risk.”

His eyes blazed with anger. “If that’s true, then I feel sorry for you. Because you’re taking your risk on a gay man.”

She rolled her eyes. “Gay, right. Is that why he got so hard with me?”

He snorted. “That’s just a stripper trick to make customers think they’re enjoying it. They can all do it. His hard-on means nothing.”

“Like your hard-on right now?”

She smiled cruelly, watching his gorgeous face turn startled, then red. Her robe had fallen all the way open now, her skimpy bra and panties taunting him. She loved the emotional and physical tumult raging inside him at this moment, so evident from the burning heat in his eyes to the swelling bulge in his pants. Diego was always the suave one, teasing her until she blushed. Now she was teasing him, and it felt like heaven.

“I’ve never denied wanting to have sex with you,” he said tersely. His posture was rigid, yet he couldn’t keep his eyes off her tiny panties. “But the truth is you’re still very sheltered.”

Sheltered. As if.

“You think so?” she asked. Casually, she hooked one finger under bra, bringing it up the pale undercurve of her breasts until it caught on her nipples. “You think I look like a sheltered, helpless little girl?”

“Er...”

Diego was breathing hard now, completely in her command. She loved it. She pulled up her bra farther, letting her stiff pink nipples pop out beneath the band. Delicately, she traced them with her index fingers before his fascinated eyes.

“Because I have to tell you, when Tristan was playing with my breasts, *he* understood that I was all woman.”

A swift, angry possessiveness swept over Diego’s face. With a passionate growl, he pushed her down on the couch and climbed on top of her, roughly sucking her exposed nipples into his mouth. She moaned underneath the ministrations of his tongue as he tore

off her bra, pulling him against her in fierce hunger.

"I knew you wanted me, I knew it, I knew it," he muttered, sucking and biting her breasts. "Goddamn you for torturing me like this..."

"I've never tortured you," she said breathlessly, arching beneath him. Her fingers fumbled at his shirt, consumed with the urgent need to strip him naked. To her surprise, he grabbed both of her wrists and slammed them down on either side of her.

"No. You're not moving. You're going to lay right here while I do whatever I want to you."

His words sent a liquid bolt of excitement straight to her pussy, but she struggled beneath him anyhow. "Oh, I don't think so."

"Well, I do." Transferring both her slender wrists to one hand, he shoved her back down into the cushions, then pulled down her panties, rendering her naked and helpless beneath him.

"Spread your legs."

Red-hot lust was saturating every inch of her, making it hard for her to do anything but moan. She was actually naked and in Diego's complete control. The shock and vulnerability of it was soaking her pussy. "I..."

"Do it, Alexandra. Open your legs wide."

Thighs trembling, she obeyed. He stared between her legs without touching her until she felt as if she would explode with desire, then looked back into her eyes. His gaze was deadly in its intensity. "You're mine," he growled. He slid one finger deep inside her, stroking and rubbing all of her most secret places. "Mine."

Alexandra squirmed beneath him, mindless with excitement as he fingered her. So many times she'd imagined kissing Diego, of him undressing her tenderly, but being stripped and owned so brutally like this was far more exciting. Her pussy felt alive with light and heat.

He flicked her clit hard, though the pain made her moan. "Whose are you?" he asked in that same severe voice. "Tell me." He slipped two more fingers inside her, working around her in circles that made her thrash beneath him.

"Yours," she whispered, thrusting her hips up to meet his fingers. "Yours, always."

"Not Tristan's. Say it. Promise me, Lex."

Her eyes flew open and met his. The rising tide of energy in her stopped. "I..."

Whatever he saw in her face made him sit back. He withdrew his fingers.

"Goddammit, Lex. Say you're mine and put this fucking Tristan bullshit to bed. You can't toy with us both. Say you want me and only me this instant!"

She clutched her robe to her and sat up, scurrying away from him. "You only came over here to manipulate me, didn't you? You want him for yourself, and you know he'd rather have me, and you can't stand it!"

His beautiful face was dark red with lust and rage and a possessiveness she'd never guessed at. "I knew it. You do want him. Goddamn your cheating little soul." He stood up and stormed over to the door, then whirled around. "He just might be the stupidest decision you've ever made."

She bounced to her feet. "I haven't made any decision, Diego! You're the one who's losing his mind over this! If you want me so bad, why have you been going after *him*?"

They stared at each other in wordless rage, both of their chests heaving. Then Diego slammed out of the apartment, the sound of the door echoing in her ears.

The Strip to Remember Bachelor Auction was being held at an upscale hotel on the other end of the city. This surprised Alexandra, who assumed the racy nature of the “contestants” would be too scandalous for respected charity circles. Yet the hotel parking lot was packed, and as she and Nola entered the lobby, they could see that dozens of men and women mingled in the lobby.

An older man approached them with a clipboard. “Please complete the waiver before going inside,” he said. “And here are your numbers.” He handed them each a stick with a cardboard numbered circle.

“Oh, uh, we’re not going to bid,” Nola said with a glance at Alexandra.

“You’re not allowed into the auction without it.”

They filled out the forms and went inside the dimly-lit ballroom. Alexandra had never been to any charity event before, though she’d attended fundraisers for her husband’s university when she was married. Common sense told her that a bachelor auction featuring strippers wouldn’t bring out the high society in force, but some of the guests were very well-dressed. She was glad she had decided to wear her red velvet cocktail dress.

“I don’t see Diego,” Nola murmured as they got in line at the bar. “Maybe he really isn’t coming.”

Just the sound of his name jolted Alexandra’s stomach. Diego. Oh good god. Her cheeks stained scarlet as she remembered his mouth on her nipples. Or the feel of his fingers sliding deep inside her. What had she said again about Tristan? Why hadn’t she just kept her mouth shut and stayed home naked and happy with Diego? Oh wait, because he had manipulated her. Because in a classic Diego double standard, he had pursued a guy he thought was too wild for her, then tried to sexually claim her for his own once he suspected that guy preferred her.

Anger and regret mixed together inside her. Now Diego would probably never speak to her again. Maybe she’d get Tristan as a consolation prize, but she would lose someone who meant the world to her.

“Oh wait. There he is.”

Alexandra turned to see him across the ballroom, casually lounging in that designer black suit. A glass of champagne was in his hand, and he looked bored and gorgeous, as if oblivious to the many stares and whispers leveled his way. He’d perfected that act to a T, she knew. She scowled in his direction.

The ballroom darkened. “Ladies and Gentlemen... Welcome to the Annual Strip To Remember Bachelor Auction.”

The emcee walked out in a tux, smiling over the microphone. He seemed very suave and comfortable, inviting the crowd to spend their paychecks on a date with the man of their dreams. “Don’t be shy—and don’t be frugal. Tonight’s your chance to help the hungry and have a wonderful evening with the hottest boys in town. We’ve got all kinds of fantastic dates to auction off tonight, from spa treatments to candlelit dinners cooked by the best chefs around. So get out your checkbooks because it’s time for a Strip to Remember!”

The crowd surged toward the stage as “Justin” was called out, a muscular Irish-looking man she recognized from Heartbreakers. His date included tickets to a local hockey game. Alexandra was surprised to see women bidding on him as well as men. Carefully, she listened to the bids. As they rose to three hundred, then almost four

hundred, she knew she could never afford to bid on Tristan. Oh well. Hopefully, she wouldn't need to.

"And now... Cody! Here's your chance to see the most popular musical in town."

The next three strippers weren't nearly as cute as Tristan, in Alexandra's opinion, but they fetched a pretty penny. It was impossible to tell if the people were bidding more on the date itself or the guy they'd go on the date with. When Hunter appeared, looking adorable in a bow-tie, she couldn't help but smile. She sensed he would be popular, and he was: he fetched the highest amount of the evening, over seven hundred dollars, simply for dinner at a French restaurant.

"And now the one many of you have been waiting for... Tristan!"

Alexandra's heart skipped. She couldn't help glancing across the club to search out Diego. He gazed back at her coldly before they each turned toward the stage.

Tristan looked almost unbearably cute, a small but cocky smile gracing his face in the stage lights. With his wild, black hair tamed and his tattoos hidden, he looked very young tonight, though not innocent. The impish glee in his eyes ruined that impression right off.

His date was one of the better ones—a day at a luxurious spa next Friday. Dual massages and mud baths, along with champagne and a catered lunch, would be only some of the treats offered on his date. Alexandra sighed longingly. What she wouldn't give to go on this date with him.

"Four hundred dollars."

Diego's voice was calm and self-assured as he called out his starting bid. Tristan's dark eyes went wide and most of the audience turned to gape at him. Each bid started at fifty dollars and climbed from there. No one had jumped up so swiftly right at the start.

You unimaginable bastard. Alexandra's knees shook with anger. Was he crazy, trying to spend that much money just to hurt her?

A moment later, a woman in her forties stepped forward. "Five hundred."

"Six." Diego did everything but yawn, he looked so bored.

"Six hundred and fifty." But the woman looked hesitant, as if near her limit.

Another man stepped forward. "Seven hundred."

"Eight." Diego glanced over his shoulder at Alexandra and gave her that insolent, arrogant smile.

That did it. Alexandra charged to the front. "Nine hundred."

Tristan's eyes darted to her. A mischievous smile broke out on his face before he dropped it and resumed his poker face again.

"One thousand." Diego's green eyes said he could do this all night.

Damn him. Her credit cards were almost at their limit. But she knew he wasn't exactly flush these days himself, having recently lost a bundle on a real estate deal gone bad. He might just possibly be near his limit. And—she remembered it with a spring of hope—she had her one thousand dollar signing bonus to rely on.

"Twelve hundred." She tried desperately to remember if she had to work next Friday. If so, Nola could cover her shift.

His eyes flared. He had expected her to fold. That just made her more determined not to. "Thirteen hundred."

The other bidders had fallen silent, watching them in amazement with the rest of the club.

“Fourteen.” She returned her own version of his earlier cool smile.

“I—” Diego’s throat worked. He looked bitter and outraged. “Fifteen hundred.” But his voice was quiet. He was at his own limit.

“Fifteen fifty.”

They stared at each other, one in bitterness, one in triumph, as the emcee called it. “Sold to... the lady in red.”

She had won. She actually had a date with Tristan, and no one could take it away from her. Now she simply had to come up with another five hundred and fifty dollars after her bonus. But it was worth it. Even past the enjoyment of the spa date with Tristan, she had blocked Diego from seducing him himself.

Drained from the tension of bidding, she turned toward the bar. One of the auction staff took her arm. “Backstage, dear. You must make payment arrangements before leaving.”

Wow, they didn’t waste any time. She gave a silent thanks for bringing her credit cards as Diego hustled up to her side. “You have got to be kidding me. Fifteen hundred bucks? You don’t have that kind of money, and we both know it.”

“Neither do you,” she snapped. She was annoyed that he accompanied her backstage. “Look, would you just get out of my sight? I’ve had enough of you tonight to last me a lifetime.”

“Oh really? Because the way you acted earlier says otherwise. You were clawing at me, begging me for more—”

“Children,” cut in a dry, authoritative voice. “Please.”

They both went quiet as they took in the sight of Russell—Tristan’s ex-boyfriend, the jealous club owner of Heartbreakers. He was seated backstage at a desk with a ledger and a bag full of cash and checks. Dressed in black, his silver hair waving backward, he reminded Alexandra of a cruel king.

Her mouth went dry. “Uh—hello.” She struggled for composure. “I, uh, won on Tristan’s auction.”

“Of course you did.” Those blue eyes bore into her with icy disdain. “One thousand, five hundred and fifty dollars. Will that be cash or check?”

She took out her wallet, as if she routinely spent this kind of money. “Visa.”

His cold eyes filled with contempt. “No credit cards, dear. It’s stated right there in the agreement you and everyone else signed when you walked through the door.”

She stared at him in shock. No credit cards? Who the hell could pay that kind of cash? “I... uh...” She hadn’t read the agreement, of course. She hadn’t been intending to bid, so who cared?

“You agreed to pay immediately,” Russell went on in a tone that could cut glass. He held out his hand. “I need the money now, dear. Or do you not understand the consequences of entering fraudulent bids at charity auctions?”

“I...” Her cheeks felt as if they were on fire, being threatened by this man who already disliked her. “I’m sorry, I really am but—Diego, please can you help me out? Please? Just for tonight, I’ll pay you back...” Her tone faded as she looked in his equally deadly eyes.

“You think I’m going to help you? After you got yourself into this mess over that little slut?” He almost spat the last word. “No. You’re on your own. Maybe now you’ll learn that you’re in way over your head with this one.”

Russell smirked, as if enjoying her plight.

This was like a nightmare. She owed money, a lot of money, and Diego was acting as if he hated her. All over a sexy stripper they barely knew. “Look...” She held up her hands helplessly. “I don’t have it. I can go to my bank tomorrow and get a loan—”

“No. You must pay now.” The man’s tone was implacable.

She shook her head. What could they do? Arrest her? That didn’t seem possible, yet she had no doubt this jerk would punish her as severely as possible. “Maybe you can put him back on the block,” she said hopefully. “Or no, I know—Diego can have him. He bid fifteen hundred dollars.” She looked beseechingly at Diego.

“No longer interested,” he said flatly.

Russell stood up. He was almost as tall as Diego, and very imposing. “You have one alternative and one only,” he said. “You can work it off tomorrow night. It’s that or the usual consequences.”

“Tomorrow night?” What was he talking about?

“Part two of the auction.” His eyes mocked her with a cruel gleam. “Tonight was the boys on the block, but tomorrow it’s the girls from the Diva Dream Girls club. And their auction brings in *much* higher bids than this one does.”

Alexandra searched his face for some sign that he was kidding. “I—How could I be part of the auction? I’m not a stripper.”

“We’ll say you’re new. That you just won the amateur night contest.” The cruelty was in full bloom on his patrician face now. “Since Tristan finds you so attractive, I’ll assume the men tomorrow night will as well. You should fetch a good price for the charity.”

Her jaw dropped. He couldn’t be serious. But the intensity in his eyes told her he was. A glance at Diego told her he wanted to see her humbled as well. This was the only out being offered to her, and no matter how humiliating it would be to impersonate a stripper on the auction block tomorrow night, she had to take it.

Chapter Five

“Wow. Just...wow. I can’t believe this.”

The sincerity of Nola’s sympathy was belied by her frequent bursts of laughter. “You, modest little you, are going to go out on a stage before hundreds of men and pretend to be a stripper. Oh my god.” She buried her face in her hands as the giggles overtook her again.

“Nola! Come on. Help me out here.”

Alexandra’s anxiety had been rising to a fever pitch all day. It was already Saturday afternoon, and she had yet to find a way out of this demeaning situation. She’d called her bank frantically that morning and asked to be approved for a loan. She suspected Russell wouldn’t accept money as this point, that his true goal was to punish her for capturing Tristan’s eye, but it didn’t matter. Her loan wouldn’t be approved for a few business days. Nor could she get such a large cash advance on her credit cards. She’d asked around today and learned that most auctions offered twenty-eight days to make payment. Apparently, Russell was simply imposing these ridiculous terms to get revenge on her. That only increased her panic about tonight.

“We need to pick out a stripper name for you,” Nola mused. “How about Destiny?”

“What? No. I’m not changing my name...” Alexandra thought again. What if there were old colleagues of Conrad’s in the audience or former classmates? “Well, okay. And heavy contouring makeup so no one recognizes me. Wait, what am I saying? I’m not doing this.”

“You’re doing it,” Nola said. “You don’t have a choice. Come on, Alexandra, it could be fun. It’s not like you have to get naked.”

Alexandra groaned. She didn’t know what she feared more—having to go up on stage in front of all those leering men or actually going on the date with some skeezy old guy. She decided to change the subject. “Who had the winning bid on Santiago? I thought the planetarium date sounded cool.”

“A woman.” Nola shrugged philosophically. “She was older but still pretty attractive. He didn’t look too unhappy at the idea of a night out with her.”

Alexandra watched her friend closely for signs of jealousy. “It’s not a real date. I’m sure nothing will happen.”

“I don’t care if it does.” Nola stretched. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s a sweet guy, but he’s strictly fling material. I don’t want another relationship right now—not right after breaking up with Ben. And I really don’t think I could handle dating a stripper anyhow. I’d always be wondering what beautiful customer he was meeting in the club that night.”

Her last words echoed in Alexandra’s ears. Tristan’s job was to essentially flirt, strip and grind naked on strangers—new ones every night. She was kidding herself if she thought prettier women or hotter men would never come into Heartbreakers. But she couldn’t think about that now. Their spa date was in six days, and she would be alone with him for hours. She just had to get through tonight first.

A few hours later she stood in a dressing room at the same hotel ballroom surrounded by two dozen strippers.

Oh my god. She couldn’t do this. Now that she was actually here with the other

women, she felt inadequate, clumsy and plain. These girls were done up to the nines, from their sex-kitten hair to their manicured nails and spray tans. Some wore skimpy dresses and others wore bikinis and lingerie. She, on the other hand, had brought a little black dress and heels, the only truly sexy dress she had besides the red cocktail dress she'd worn last night. The coordinator had immediately vetoed it, saying they already had a designated outfit for her. So she had been forced to change into a short chiffon nightie with a matching tiny thong. Now she sat in front of a lighted mirror, trying frantically to alter her facial contours with makeup. It wasn't much use, of course; she'd still be recognized by anyone who knew her.

That sick feeling in her stomach was growing stronger by the minute. When she noticed the whispers and pointed looks from the other strippers, she grew downright nauseous.

The auction coordinator approached. "Name?"

"Delilah."

"We already have a Delilah."

Damn. She tried frantically to come up with another stage name. The coordinator beat her to it. "You look like an Angel. We'll go with that. Did they tell you what your date is?"

She nodded. "Dinner for two at L'Amour."

"That's my date!" said one of the strippers, striding across the room. Her eyes flashed. "I have that date, not you."

"Chill out, Lisette," another stripper said. She was a tall, busty redhead in her thirties and the only woman there to give Alexandra a smile tonight. "Does it really matter?"

The coordinator looked hassled as she flipped through her papers. "Okay, you're the new girl. Right. Your date—oh, it's a good one—is an overnight at a ski resort."

Overnight? Alexandra's stomach plunged to her feet as the other strippers turned. "Wait, that's not fair!" yelled the first stripper. "If there's an overnight date, I should have it!"

Alexandra tried to force her trembling lips into a smile. "I wouldn't mind switching..."

"No, nuh-uh," said the coordinator as the first stripper shrieked dramatically with anger. "Russell said this was your date and that's how it stays."

Russell. Of course he'd stick her with the most protracted, uncomfortable date of all. Wouldn't most of the guys out there assume an overnight date meant sex? They'd definitely assume she was one of those strippers that didn't mind providing a little extra service. Gross.

Tristan, I hope you're worth all this.

"Try to relax," said the older redheaded stripper after the coordinator left. "You look like you're about to get sick, and trust me, that's not a look that will get bids."

The woman's kindness almost brought tears to Alexandra's eyes. But there was no time to cry, for the coordinator was lining up the girls in order for the auction. In what seemed like seconds, the first one was called out on stage.

Cold sweat trickled down Alexandra's spine when the girl ahead of her walked out. She knew it would only be a few minutes until her turn.

"And now we have a special treat... The newest stripper at Diva Dream Girls, so new most of you have probably never seen her... say hello to Angel!"

Forcing a bright smile, she walked out of the curtains and down the runway. The lights of the stage were so blinding that all she saw was darkness. *Don't fall, don't fall, don't fall.* That was all she could think as she trembled on her platform heels. The emcee read off the details of her date while she smiled until her cheeks hurt. She felt as stiff as a piece of wood there in the gaze of hundreds of men, but she looked at different parts of the ballroom as the coordinator had recommended.

After a few moments, she became aware of the cacophony of whistles and cheers. They really liked her: why? Because she was still a mystery and the club regulars hadn't yet seen her nude? She caught sight of a familiar face by the stage: Tristan. Happiness surged through her, followed by pleasure at the lustful awe in his eyes. Then she realized that he and many of the other men were staring at her chest.

In the glare of the stage lights, her chiffon nightie was even more transparent than she'd feared. Her bare breasts were for all intents and purposes on show.

Mortification washed through her like a hot wave, descending downward through her body until her knees shook. It took everything she had not to cross her arms and shield herself. *Damn you, Russell.* He was definitely intent on humiliating her as much as possible.

"Again, this is one date you won't want to miss, at the nearby Aspen Hills Ski Resort. After a complimentary day on the slopes, enjoy a fireside dinner for two, followed by an overnight stay in your very own chalet. You'll love a date with this snowbunny..."

Just get this over with, she thought in anguish. Surely Russell had instructed the emcee to read the date details twice to keep her topless on display as long as possible. The only thing keeping her sane at that moment was the knowledge that, after just a few minutes of bidding, she could walk off this stage, strip off this slutty scrap of fabric and begin to salvage her dignity.

There was a sea of bids as soon as her auction officially opened.

"Five hundred," said a young executive-looking type.

A scruffy old man countered with, "Five hundred fifty."

A gaunt man with hollow eyes stepped forward. "Eight hundred," he said quietly. His gaze was trained unblinkingly between her legs. She began to feel afraid for the first time.

"Eight fifty," snapped the young executive.

It went on and on. Somewhere in her panic was the awareness that she was fetching a higher price than most of the other strippers. She supposed that could be related to the luxurious date, but she suspected from the hungry male eyes staring her down that it had much to do with her newcomer status as well. These men wanted to own her, be the first to claim her before she became just another stripper, they'd seen naked dozens of times. As the gaunt man consistently outbid everyone else, she felt only despair. It wasn't fair that she would have to spend an entire day and night with this grizzled old stranger, all because she'd forgotten to read the auction rules last night. Helplessly, she looked at Tristan. He gave her a sad smile. As a club employee, he was forbidden from bidding.

"Eighteen hundred," the gaunt man said with a menacing laugh.

Silence fell. The other bidders looked angry and defeated, but said nothing. Sour alarm surged in her throat. No, she couldn't be auctioned off to this guy. Not for an entire night.

“Going once... going twice...”

“Two thousand.”

Diego stepped forward, smiling that beautifully self-assured smile that had irritated Alexandra so many days. Tonight the sight of it made her want to cry with gratitude. He winked at her and cleared his throat. “I said, two thousand.”

The emcee seemed flustered. “I—Two thousand. Do I hear twenty-one hundred?”

The gaunt man’s face had darkened with anger. He seemed to back down, then scowled. “Twenty-two hundred.”

“Twenty-four.” Diego gave the man an ice-cold stare. For a long moment, she held her breath, waiting for the other man to come back with a counterbid. But his thin lips pressed shut.

“Twenty-four hundred. Going once. Going twice...”

Blinking away her tears, Alexandra barely managed to smile at Diego. Tristan stepped up next to him and gave her a reassuring nod. She understood then that both her men had come through for her—and that maybe, once all of them set aside their games and jealousy, they could turn this three-way heat into something all of them could enjoy.

The auction was still going on when she slipped from the dressing room a half hour later. She’d torn off the embarrassing nightie, put her real clothes back on, then locked herself in a bathroom stall to have a good cry, releasing all the tension and humiliation from her stiff body. Tonight had been even more stressful than she’d dreamed, but she’d gotten through it. Later she could always look back and say she hadn’t chickened out. But right now she didn’t want to look back. She wanted to look forward to the dates awaiting her with Tristan and Diego.

She felt almost shy as she headed into the ballroom. Standing half-naked in the stage lights should have made anything else a piece of cake, but just thinking about the conversation she was about to have with Diego filled her with dread. In the last two days, they had almost had sex, fought bitterly and stopped speaking. Now he had saved her from a horrible situation. What words could she possibly find?

Her mind was in such a dither that she almost ran right into the blond man stepping in front of her.

“Hey, sexy.”

Hunter. His smile was tinged with a lascivious leer tonight, letting her know just how much he had enjoyed the show she’d inadvertently provided on stage.

“Hey, yourself.” She wasn’t in the mood for his tricks tonight, but then she figured he couldn’t do anything else to come between her and Tristan. “Why are you here?”

“My ex-girlfriend was in the auction tonight. She had the casino date.”

“Your ex is a dancer too?” She wondered if they had exchanged customer stories when they got home at night.

“Sure, she’s the one who got me into the business.” Hunter hesitated. “You were great up there, by the way. I heard what happened with Russell. Can’t say I’m surprised, but you handled it well.”

She shrugged. “You warned me about him.” She caught sight of Diego and Tristan at the bar. Their backs were to her as they leaned over their drinks. “I shouldn’t have overbid on Tristan last night.”

Hunter’s smile turned sour. “I knew someone was going to empty their wallet on him, but I didn’t think it’d be you. Not when you could have him for free.”

Put that way, she felt even dumber. “It was—a competitive thing. Between me and Diego.” She met his eyes with a challenging look. “You know, the way you’re competitive with Tristan.”

He snorted. “I’m not competitive with that asshole.” He looked her up and down again, his expression both lustful and bitter. “Oh well. Maybe the next time we meet, things will end differently.”

She laughed. “Sorry, but I have no intentions of ever going back to Heartbreakers.”

Hunter merely smiled, turned and walked off into the crowd.

Alexandra took a deep breath. Hunter was cute, and if it hadn’t been for Tristan, maybe he would have been her stripper fling. As it was—she already had two men on her mind, and that was enough.

She slipped through the throngs of men and couples watching the auction. Ten feet from the bar, though, she paused as a lump formed in her throat. They made such a stunning couple, the two of them: Diego, taller, older and more sophisticated, with those sculpted cheekbones and emerald eyes that never stopped turning heads; then Tristan, younger and adorably boyish, his naughty smile offset by that innocent face. She couldn’t blame either of them for falling for the other.

All of which begged the question, how did she fit in? She had outbid Diego last night for the date with Tristan, and pure gentlemanly duty had made Diego rescue her tonight. That didn’t really prove that either of them wanted her more than each other.

She summoned her courage and walked up to their barstools. “Hey, boys. Come here often?”

The first thing she saw was a leap of gratitude in Diego’s eyes. He crushed her to him. “You were incredible up there,” he murmured into her hair. “You are so brave, Alexandra. I’ll never call you sheltered again.”

She closed her eyes and let herself melt into his embrace. All this past year, Diego was always teasing, always restless, a sexually hungry male on the prowl. This new, fiercely protective side of him reverberated inside her like a wake-up bell. She wanted him to hold her like this forever.

She forced herself away, not wanting to be rude to Tristan. “Diego... You didn’t have to do that. Last night was my own fault—”

“It was *our* fault. I acted like a childish jackass. This was the least I could do.”

“But twenty-four hundred dollars! At least let me pay back half—”

“Someone’s already got your half.” Diego gently steered her toward Tristan. “This was a joint project. And no, you’re not paying a dime.”

Tristan gave her a shy smile. “I wasn’t allowed to bid ’cause I work for the club... but they can’t stop me from chipping in.”

Embarrassing tears of gratitude filled her eyes. “Tristan, no! That’s way too much money. Diego and I started this. Why should you get mixed up in our juvenile competition?”

Before he could reply, a bald middle-aged man in a leather jacket interrupted them. “Hi, my name is Ned,” he said, offering her a business card. “I would have bid on you if I hadn’t already won Diamond’s auction earlier. You have a beautiful body.”

Diego stood up, all six feet four inches of him looming over the man. “She’s with us now, dude. Why don’t you move on?”

The man stepped back. “I’ll be waiting to see you onstage at the club,” he said to

Alexandra. He gave her body a long lingering stare and walked off.

“Gross.” Alexandra shuddered. “I mean, no offense, Tristan, I know this is what you do for a living. But guys like that skeeve me out.”

Tristan laughed. “All dancers get skeeved out. You don’t have to apologize. But I do think we should get you out of here. None of the other girls are hanging around. You’re just going to keep getting hassled if we stay.”

As they left, Alexandra noted the hotel parking lot was far more crowded than it was the previous night. Apparently, the girls’ auction was much more popular than the boys’ auction. Diego led the way to his car, but Tristan stopped them. “Let’s take Russell’s limo instead,” he said with a cruel smile. “It’ll serve his ass right if we leave him here without his ride.”

A brief, instinctive fear flickered in Alexandra before she realized that Tristan’s ex held no more power over her. She’d paid her debt to him and his charity auctions, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to her if Tristan “borrowed” his limo. “Go for it,” she told him.

Tristan led them into the valet section down to where a snow-covered stretch limo was parked. It was unlocked, but the chauffeur was missing. “Probably inside at the bar,” he said. “I’ll go find him.”

He headed back toward the hotel, leaving Alexandra and Diego alone for the first time since their fight last night.

A fight that started out with me naked and getting fingered, Alexandra thought as her face turned hot.

Diego looked as uncomfortable as she felt. He opened the limo door with a crooked smile. “Your chariot, my queen.”

Alexandra slid inside. She’d never been inside a limo before, though she didn’t want to admit that to Diego. She took a good look around. Other than the extended length of cushioned seating, she didn’t see what the big deal was.

Diego slid in next to her and shut the door.

Darkness entombed them. The windows were covered with snow, blocking out the hotel lot lights. Too nervous to meet his eyes, Alexandra examined her manicure. He looked so good to her right then, his glossy dark hair gleaming in the dark interior of the car.

“Diego, we can’t let Tristan pay part of the date,” she began. That animal attraction was swelling between them, but she refused to give in to it. “He’s not to blame for anything of this, and twelve hundred dollars is a lot of money.”

“He can afford it. He told me he averages seven to eight hundred a night at the club.” Diego stroked the back of her hair with one finger. “Besides, he wanted to bid on you anyway. He just couldn’t due to the rules.”

She glanced at him. His green eyes no longer simmered with jealousy as they had for the last week. Yet she could hear the resignation in his voice. “Diego, I know you like him...”

“And he likes you. It’s obvious. He was practically struck dumb when you walked out on stage tonight.”

“I’m sure he likes you too. Who wouldn’t want you? You’re like a walking sex bomb.”

He gave her a heavy look. “And does that go for you too?”

Her breath caught in her throat. "You were there last night."

"Last night didn't really mean anything other than... you were, say, caught up in the moment." His fingers drifted down to her neck, circling her top vertebrae. She felt her reluctance dissolve under the magic of his touch. "You wouldn't be the first person I've, uh, swept off their feet. But it doesn't necessarily mean it's more than a passing impulse."

Her cheeks burned. "I think it was pretty obvious how much I wanted to continue."

He leaned close to her, his body heat electrifying hers. All the lustful memories of last night came flooding back as his fingers traced her collarbone. "You're not answering my question."

Her nipples were so hard they hurt. "Diego, Tristan could come back any second..."

He slipped his hand into her sweater, toying with her right nipple just enough to fog her mind.

"So what?" He lightly bit her throat, then slid her sweater up to her neck. She leaned her head back and succumbed to the moment as he pushed up her bra, exposing her breasts. "Beautiful," he murmured before bowing his dark head to suck her pink-tipped nipple into his mouth.

A soft moan escaped her lips. Despite the storm of emotions warring inside her, his hard body was the perfect antidote to this nerve-wracking night.

"We both need this," Diego whispered. "Don't fight it."

Snow continued to fall down over the limo, cloaking them in a soft, primitive cave. She unzipped his pants and was rewarded with the hot surge of his erection into her hands. She bit her lip. So many times this last year she had wondered about his cock, about its smoothness, length and shape. Now it was hers to stroke and squeeze and play with, an impressively thick shaft that felt hot and alive in her hands.

He leaned his forehead against hers. They gazed into each other's eyes as she played with his cock.

"I've thought about this so many times," he said.

Her throat was hoarse. "Not as many times as me, I bet."

Slowly his lips met hers. "Don't be so sure."

The first shivery touch of his mouth sent a bolt of lightning through her. Despite everything that had happened this weekend, it was this first kiss that confirmed the passion between them. This was no casual desire here. This was a feeling that ran deep.

His tongue brushed hers, hot and light. As she began to rhythmically stroke his cock, Diego moaned in her mouth. "Don't stop touching me," he whispered.

He stopped touching her, though, when he deftly unzipped her jeans and slid them down. Alexandra felt the cool leather seat beneath her bare bottom a moment later. In a lost, logical part of her mind, she knew that Tristan was coming back any moment, and he might not be so happy to find her naked with Diego like this. Yet as Diego thrust his thumb into her wetness, she forgot to care. She had never had sex in a car as a teenager, and the taboo feeling only intensified the ache in her clit as Diego deftly played with her pussy. Slowly, he circled his thumb around her soft opening, making her writhe with need.

She palmed the head of his cock until he groaned. "Slow down," he whispered. "I'm going to be a one-minute wonder if you keep that up."

Her mouth was working its way across his throat, kissing and biting his tender skin. "As hot as I am, one minute might be all I need."

A sudden rush of wintry air made them jump apart. Flushed and disoriented, Alexandra pulled back to realize Russell and the valet were both staring through the open door. She quickly pulled up her jeans, Diego hurriedly zipping up his pants at the same time.

“What the hell are you two doing in my limo?” Russell snapped. “Get out this instant!”

Alexandra pulled her top down, aware of the valet’s hungry eyes. Burning with embarrassment, she slid out of the limo, Diego right behind her. She turned to Russell. “You know, it was obvious that you tried to punish me tonight. But I’ve still got my date with Tristan, and you can’t do a damn thing about it.”

Russell’s eyes were icy with rage. “You’re nothing but a little slut.”

“A little slut who’s about to have Tristan in her bed.” Alexandra smiled and walked off.

“Nice,” Diego said in a low voice as he led her back to the hotel. His hand felt big and protective over hers as he steered her around a patch of ice. “You had to rub that in his face, didn’t you?”

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s going to be awesome.” She glanced at him. “Diego—you know, this spa date was for two people, but I’m sure you could come along.”

He shook his head. “No. It’s your date with him. I’m not going to be a third wheel.”

Despite his words, his voice was strained. Alexandra could see Tristan at the front doors of the hotel, but she had to get this straight with Diego. “Look, I know you disapprove of me dating him.”

“I don’t disapprove.” He cut himself off. “Okay, maybe I do. I just never thought *you* would go for a bisexual guy.”

She frowned. “Why wouldn’t I? You know I’m not homophobic.”

“No, but you have been completely skittish and timid about dating since I’ve known you. I thought you’d be the last woman to give a bisexual man a chance.”

She began to respond, then repeated his words to herself. “Are we talking about Tristan or something else here?” she asked softly.

Diego’s mouth tightened, but he wouldn’t look at her. “I’m saying that all these months when I looked at you, all I saw was fear. And because of that, I never thought you were ready for anything more.”

Tristan was coming toward them. Diego dropped her hand and headed forward to meet him, leaving Alexandra’s thoughts as tumultuous as her heart.

Chapter Six

Monday came, but it didn't bring any answers to the blizzard of questions in Alexandra's head. Diego. Tristan. Her. Who wanted what from whom? How smart was getting involved with either of them? She had four more days of nervous anticipation until her date with Tristan, and she couldn't believe it was really possible that they would finally spend an entire day together. Diego had driven them both home Saturday night, but the silence between the three of them had been so awkward that she'd forgotten to give him her number. Now she had no way to contact him before meeting him at the Bella Luna spa Friday at noon.

No one at Maxwell's knew about the bachelor auctions besides Nola and Diego. Alexandra hoped to keep it that way. Most of the other makeup artists had stopped discussing their trip to Heartbreakers, and Alexandra certainly wasn't going to bring it up. Really the only change at work was Heidi's new attitude. Now, instead of talking nonstop about her upcoming wedding, she talked incessantly of how much she loved helping customers and doing makeup. She was clearly gunning for the counter manager position, as evident from her servile attitude toward Lynnette. "Oh, don't lift those boxes, Lynnette! Let me do it. You've got so much on your mind these days. You just let me take care of *everything*." Heidi was so effective a brown-noser, in fact, that Alexandra began to worry about losing the position to her.

Normally she would check in with Diego just to verify that he was still recommending her. Yet their Saturday night conversation had left her feeling too confused to call him.

What had he actually tried to say to her? Their fast and breathless encounters had left no doubt in her mind that he wanted her physically pretty badly. Well, that wasn't exactly news. Yes, she'd been surprised by the urgency of his passion, but he'd made no secret of the fact he found her attractive. Still, the real surprise had been his final words. If she understood him correctly, Diego had been holding back his feelings all this time from fear of scaring her away. He'd been hinting that he—Diego Garcia, the hottest, most unattainable heartbreaker in town—actually felt romantic emotions for her she'd never dreamed he was capable of.

Of course, he had never dreamed she was capable of writhing feverishly underneath a naked stranger. Apparently they'd both been wrong about each other.

Call me, Diego. Come into the store, do something to let me know where we stand. But each day passed without a word. She knew he was probably busy. He had multiple stores in his region to supervise. Yet she suspected he simply felt as unsure about their undefined status as she did.

After being absent all week, Mrs. Levinson wandered in on Thursday afternoon and headed straight for the new Valentine-themed display with bright eyes. Alexandra was helping her try on highlighting powders when all of the male shoe clerks in the opposite department looked awestruck toward the doors.

Her heart began to race. So Diego was making one of his typical catwalk entrances. Who else could command such attention? She bit her lip, determined not to turn around. Let him come to her. Yet when someone lightly touched her wrist, she jumped.

“Hey.”

Tristan’s saucy grin greeted her.

She almost dropped the makeup brush she was using on Mrs. Levinson. “Oh—oh, hi.”

Tristan’s here, Tristan’s right here in the store, oh my God. Dimly, she remembered telling him over breakfast at the all-night diner where she worked. Remembering Mrs. Levinson, she began to reapply the champagne-colored powder with shaky hands. But Mrs. Levinson briskly pushed her hand away.

“Now, who is this young man?” Mrs. Levinson asked. “I know you’re not the taller, darker one who likes Alexandra. Who are you?”

Oh no. This had the potential to be seriously embarrassing. “His name is Tristan, Mrs. Levinson, and he’s friends with both Diego and I,” Alexandra told her. “We met him a few weeks ago.”

Mrs. Levinson peered closely at his face. “Oh my. I didn’t know you had two young men, Alexandra.”

“He’s not my young man,” Alexandra insisted firmly. “Neither is Diego. We’re all just friends, Mrs. Levinson.” She was too embarrassed to meet Tristan’s eyes, but she could see that he was grinning ear to ear.

“You’re a very nice-looking boy,” Mrs. Levinson told him. “Now tell me, Alexandra, why do you say that you’re just friends when it’s clear as day that these young men are interested in you? You three would make a lovely trio.”

The brush in Alexandra’s hand clattered to the linoleum floor. “*Trio?*” She couldn’t believe her ears. Surely her eightysomething customer hadn’t just suggested what she thought she had.

“That’s what we called it in my day,” Mrs. Levinson said airily. Hopping off the makeover stool, she patted her white curls and strolled off.

Alexandra busied herself picking up the brush and putting the tester powder away, too flummoxed to look at Tristan. Her cheeks were burning, and she was aware that all of the makeup artists who had gone to Heartbreakers two weeks ago were openly gawking at them. He did look especially cute today, she thought, though nothing about him broadcast “stripper” in her opinion. In his faded jeans and black winter jacket and combat boots, he looked like any other guy his age.

Tristan awkwardly cleared his throat. “You didn’t give me your number last weekend, so I thought I’d just confirm that, you know, we’re all set for tomorrow.”

A wild, nervous laughter bubbled up inside her, but she forced it down. “After all I went through to get a date with you? I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“You know, I wanted to tell you—you didn’t have to go through all that. I would have asked you out myself if I had thought you’d say yes.”

His boyish face looked almost shy. It touched her.

“Like I would have said no,” she teased.

He looked almost sheepish. “Most women wouldn’t call me a catch, Lex. Kicked out of the Army, now dancing naked for tips in a gay bar—doesn’t really look too good on paper, you know?”

His faint Texas twang stole her heart all over again. “You look good to me no matter what.”

He smiled bashfully. “Yeah, well... So do you.”

Before she could thank him for the compliment, Heidi appeared before them with blazing eyes. “Alexandra, is this a customer? Because we’re way too busy for you to be chatting all day with your friends.”

Alexandra gave her an icy stare. The cosmetics department was rather empty, but with the counter manager job on the line, she was determined to stay professional.

“Since when are you my boss, Heidi? If we’re so busy, maybe *you* should get back to work.”

Heidi leaned in close. “You’re going to be so sorry when Lynnette is gone.”

Tristan began backing away. “Uh, I didn’t mean to get you in trouble, Lex—”

“No, Tristan, wait. You’re fine.” Alexandra reached for his arm. There was no way she was letting Heidi’s bitchiness frighten him away.

But he only gave her a quick smile. “Look, I’ll see you tomorrow.” He vanished into the crowd.

Alexandra swung toward Heidi. “You really need to learn to butt out, you know that?”

Heidi’s lip curled. “Oh please. You’re not honestly mad because that little hooker left, are you? Even *you* can’t be that desperate.”

Alexandra didn’t let herself react with the rage she actually felt. Instead she merely adopted that bored, superior expression she’d seen Diego do a hundred times. “Nice try, Heidi. Tristan’s gorgeous. Anyone would want him—and it obviously bothers you that he wants me.” She enjoyed the slow burn in Heidi’s eyes.

“*Eww*. Why would I care? I’m marrying the man of my dreams in three months.”

Yet the bitterness in Heidi’s eyes told a different tale. Alexandra looked at her closely. Suddenly, she sensed a much deeper reason for Heidi’s constant envy.

“If he was really the man of your dreams, I don’t think you’d be this miserable,” she said. “Heidi—maybe you should be sure you’re getting married for the right reasons.”

“The right reasons?” Heidi’s blue eyes swelled until they looked like marbles. “How dare you! My fiancé is perfect. His family is one of the wealthiest in the city. You’re just a—skanky little bitch compared to them!”

“Girls!” Lynnette was upon them, her normally serene face stricken with outrage. “Heidi, customers all over the store can hear you. Have you lost your mind?”

Alexandra was mortified. “Lynnette, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, Alexandra. From what I heard, you were merely defending yourself.” She turned to Heidi. “You have the temper of a two-year-old, Heidi. How do you expect the staff to respect you when you can’t control yourself?”

“She called me names!” Heidi snapped, her eyes still bulging with anger.

“She did nothing of the kind. You were the one to call her a ‘skanky little bitch.’ I think perhaps you’d better take the rest of the day off and cool down.”

“What? Why? I was just telling her to get back to work—”

“You’re not the manager yet, Heidi. And after this display, I don’t think you ever will be.” Lynnette sighed heavily. “Don’t argue with me. Just go.”

Heidi threw them both an angry look and stormed off.

Well, there was one less issue to worry about. With Heidi out of the running, the counter manager job was almost certainly hers—and so was that signing bonus. Alexandra quickly approached a new customer, knowing that keeping busy was the best way to keep her mind off Tristan and the endless countdown of hours before their date.

Friday morning dawned cold and gray. Though it wasn't snowing, the heavy clouds cast a gloomy pall over the morning. Alexandra had just gotten out of the shower when her phone rang.

Diego. Finally. She grabbed the phone.

"It's me. I was just calling to say that, ah, I hope your date goes okay. I know we left things on an odd note last weekend..."

Relief surged through her. "That's an understatement. Diego, come with us today."

"No. This is your date. You won it fair and square. Besides, I've had you to myself for a year now... and I didn't use that time the way I should have, so it's only fair to let Tristan have his shot."

She wrapped a blue bath towel around her as she absorbed his words. The confirmation that Diego really had cared about her all this time lit a warm glow inside her. How incredible to think that behind his party boy facade, he had wanted her with a depth she never knew.

"Just come," she said finally. Much as she wanted to be alone with Tristan, it didn't seem right to exclude Diego now that she knew how he really felt about her.

"No. I'll wait and see you tomorrow on our date."

"Tomorrow!"

The towel slipped to the floor. She shivered, naked and wet, on the bathroom tiles, unable to come up with a response. She hadn't realized the ski resort date was so soon.

"Anyway," Diego said in an embarrassed tone when she didn't respond. "The date includes a limo, and it's coming by to pick us up tomorrow morning. Be ready at ten o'clock."

"Okay." Her lips felt numb.

"And Lex—don't overdo it today with Tristan. I want you fully rested for tomorrow."

The lascivious edge in his tone made his meaning clear. She muttered goodbye and hung up. How bizarre to have two hot dates in one weekend after living like a nun for so long. But she tried not to focus on that as she prepared for her day at the spa.

The Bella Luna Spa was in an expensive neighborhood uptown. Said to cater to the wealthiest women in the city, it occupied the kind of majestic brownstone Alexandra dreamt of owning one day. She had often fantasized about a relaxing day inside its impressive walls, but in reality, she knew that even one of their services would cost half her weekly paycheck. Today, though, she gathered all of her poise and walked up the big stone steps, as if she received luxury salon services all the time.

Stepping into the marble-floored lobby was like walking into a small palace. The cool scents of shampoo and flowers assailed her, along with the faint strains of a symphony. Somehow she couldn't imagine Tristan in here. Unsurprisingly, he was nowhere in sight. Faint anxiety nudged her.

She walked up to the front desk. "Hi, my name is Alexandra O'Malley. I won a spa date here today..."

"Of course, Ms. O'Malley. One moment." The receptionist handed her a menu of salon services, while she punched in a number on the desk phone. "Alexandra O'Malley is waiting for you," she said into the phone.

Alexandra studied the menu. Every floor was dedicated to a different area, from skin care to hair to massage to makeup and nails.

“Alexandra! So glad you could join us today.”

A fiftyish woman with a wild halo of red frizz beamed at her. She clasped her hands together and did a slight bow. “I am Chandra, your spa coordinator for the day. Whatever you need, you have only to ask, and I will provide it.”

“Great.” *Can you provide my dream boy?* she wanted to ask. It was now quarter past noon, and there was still no sign of Tristan as Chandra explained what services she could expect today, then pointed to a changing room. “Spa robes are in there. Just put your things in your locker and go through the other door.”

“Thanks.” She quickly stripped down, slid on the thick white spa robe, then checked her phone. Nope, no message from Tristan either. Dammit, where was he? At last, she locked up her belongings and walked through the other door into a big open area of skylights, stone floors and massive potted trees.

Tristan waited for her at a table for two, dressed only in a pair of white spa shorts. His tattoos and piercings looked so incongruous in the luxurious environment that she burst out laughing.

“Thanks,” he said, getting to his feet. “Exactly the reaction I was hoping for in my sexy new shorts.” He did a little model turn, then kissed her cheek.

“Sorry.” In fact he did look pretty sexy in the spa shorts, the long shape of his cock faintly visible through the thin material, but then she figured he might look good in anything. “This just doesn’t seem like your... environment.”

“Never heard of a hot stone massage or detoxifying mud bath in my life. We didn’t have all this girlie stuff in the Army, if you know what I mean.”

She ran her hands up his waist. She loved his body, so cut and taut and sinewy. “Well, as someone who majors in ‘girlie stuff,’ I’ll be happy to show you the ropes.”

The door opened, making them jump apart. “Lunch time!” trilled Chandra, wheeling in a tray. “I think you two will be just *delighted* with today’s offering.” She went on to describe the fresh fruit, lobster bisque and cheese plate as she set each on the table. Chocolate mousse in chilled goblets followed. Alexandra couldn’t have cared less about the food, but she tried to look polite. All she wanted was to be alone with Tristan. Unfortunately, Chandra seemed as enthralled with him as everyone else and spent their lunch chatting their ears off. “Oh, I’m just so happy to be serving a member of our armed forces. Defending our country—I truly believe there is no greater honor.” At last, with obvious reluctance, she left.

“How did she know you were in the military?” Alexandra whispered after the woman left.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Tristan’s normally cute expression was grumpy. “Russell must have mentioned it when he scheduled the date. Just watch—I bet he told her to watch us like a hawk.”

Alexandra groaned. Suddenly, she regretted taunting Russell last weekend.

Sure enough, Chandra appeared before they’d finished lunch and escorted them to their scheduled massages. As they lay on huge slabs of warm stone, massage therapists working on their muscles, she stayed by their side, discussing the salon’s best hair stylists. Next, she guided them to their pedicures, continuing to talk while two women buffed and polished and prettied their feet. Alexandra chose a deep vampy red for her nails, while Tristan simply had his buffed. “Oh, such beautiful feet!” Chandra trilled as she inspected Tristan’s toes. “It’s very unusual for a man to have such nice feet, Mr.

Schroeder.”

At last, it was time for the last service of the day, a detoxifying mud bath. After ordering them chilled bottles of mineral water and white wine, Chandra led them to a private alcove with an inground pit of murky dark blue goo.

She can't possibly hang around for this, Alexandra thought.

“I believe this is truly the best detoxifying formula of any spa,” Chandra confided with a wink. “Seaweed, minerals and exfoliating agents will plump your skin while drawing out all the toxins of the city environment. You won’t believe how smooth and glowing—”

“Thank you, Chandra,” Tristan said pointedly, “but I think we’d prefer to be alone right now.”

Chandra blinked. “I, ah, of course. I’ll be back shortly.”

Tristan hurled a sponge at the door as soon as she exited. “Definitely Russell’s lap dog. Goddammit, but he’s got a long reach.”

“What is her problem? She’s acting like this is a date for three.” The words made her think guiltily of Diego.

“Let’s put it out of our heads.” Tristan smiled cleverly and indicated the pit of goo. “You first.”

Alexandra glanced down at the huge pit. It reminded her of a pig’s trough. Glancing back up at him, she realized the obvious: Tristan was waiting for her to throw off the robe and climb nude into the goo.

She went stiff. He got naked in front of strangers every night for money. She, on the other hand, could count on one hand the men who’d seen her naked. Which would be zero since her divorce.

Sensing her discomfort, Tristan grinned. “I’ll turn around.”

“Uh, thanks.” She slipped off the robe and slid into the goo as quickly as possible. As soon as she did, she realized that several mirrors around the room had broadcast her nude reflection to him anyhow. “You cheated!”

He laughed and ducked as she threw a sponge at him. “I didn’t cheat! I said I’d turn around, and I did. It was your job to check for mirrors.”

“Nice try.” She snapped her fingers. “Strip. That’s an order.”

He made a point of slowly sliding off the clingy white spa shorts. “Da da da da *da*,” he sang in a cheesy imitation of stripper music.

She rolled her eyes. “Such talent.”

As the shorts came down, she forgot to be sarcastic. Despite seeing him perform twice at Heartbreakers, she still had never seen him strip fully nude. Even when she had touched his cock during their lap dance, they had been in the dark and his underwear had pushed down around his hips. She held her breath as he lowered his shorts.

Tristan swiftly turned his back to her, whipped down the shorts, then jumped in the goo before she’d had time to even glimpse his penis in the mirror.

“Hey! That’s not fair!”

“Unfair,” he mimicked, slicing through the muddy goo to grab her ankles. “I think it was very fair, given that you didn’t let me look at you.”

“We’re not all professional strippers, you know.” She evaded his grasp, sliding backward. The contents of the tub were a cool and silky liquid that felt as wonderful as it looked unappealing.

“Thank god for that.” He gripped her armpits and pulled her up until her torso rose out of the liquid. He grinned as her breasts came into view. She struggled to get away, but he held her fast. “Hmmm, I seem to remember seeing these before...”

She didn’t want to remember her peek-a-boo nightie at the auction last weekend. “God, that was so embarrassing.”

“I thought it was pretty hot. So did everyone else, as I recall.” He began touching her breasts.

Alexandra bit her lip, hot with self-consciousness. Tristan explored her body so casually, feeling her up underwater, as if she were a sex slave he had just purchased. He toyed with her stiff nipples and ran his fingertips down her thighs. Her face flamed with embarrassment and arousal, but she forced herself to submit to his manual inspection.

“Open your legs,” he ordered. He began to play with her pussy. “Mmn, it’s been a long time since I’ve been with a woman. I feel like a little kid on Christmas morning.”

Desire was stirring to life inside her. She spread her legs as wide as she could in the pit. “Don’t stop touching me...”

He was scarcely breathing. “You might get more than you bargained for.”

Alexandra cut him off with a kiss, aching for the soft push of his tongue. As his mouth commandeered hers, she felt another moan reverberate through their lips and realized it was coming from her. That electric charge was coursing through her, bringing her nerves alive in an erotic zing of excitement. Everywhere Tristan brushed against her, she came alive with fire, and all the while, a fervent ache was building between her thighs.

A discreet knock interrupted them. They shot apart.

Chandra poked her head in. “Sorry! I don’t mean to rush you, but another couple has the mud bath booked shortly. It’s time for the hot tub and then you’re done.”

“She’s definitely working for Russell,” Tristan muttered as they rinsed off and slipped into their robes.

Chandra led them, still covered with goo, to a private bathroom. The bubbling hot tub was already turned on. “Here you go,” she said. “I do hope you enjoyed your day here at Bella Luna. Would you like me to stay and tell you about our discount program for future visits?”

“No!” Tristan and Alexandra both said forcefully.

Flashing them an uncomfortable smile, she backed toward the door. “Well, I’ll be back shortly.”

As soon as she left, Tristan jammed a chair under the knob. “No one’s interrupting us now.” He pulled off his robe, grabbed the waiting wine bottle and glasses and climbed into the churning water. Then he looked up expectantly.

Without breaking their gaze, she pulled off her robe and tossed it on the floor. With what she hoped was nonchalant grace, she sank into the bubbling water and accepted a wine glass from Tristan.

The hot water felt like heaven. Chilled white wine cooled her throat as Tristan gathered up her long wet hair and wound it on top of her head, then poured hot water down her back. She closed her eyes, succumbing to the physical euphoria spreading through her muscles.

Tristan’s strong fingers massaged the kinks out of her shoulders and neck, relaxing her into a state of blissful acceptance. “It’s just us at last,” he murmured. His hands

continued their massage down her front. Wiping the suds away from her nipples, he gently rubbed her breasts. "I wanted to be alone with you so bad that first night at the club..."

She pushed her nipples against his fingers, her bath-flushed face burning with fever. "Me too. It felt like we'd never get rid of everyone else."

She rose up from the bathwater onto her knees, exposing all of herself to Tristan's eyes. With a low guttural murmur of appreciation, he squeezed her breasts roughly, then slid his hands down her waist. Emerged from the warm water, her exposed skin felt extraordinarily sensitive: she was excruciatingly aware of each calloused fingertip caressing her nipples and stomach. His middle finger slipped down and began to titillate her clit. Biting her lip, Alexandra gripped the tiles for balance. Now he was sliding his other fingers around her wet softness, stroking her lips until a helpless moan escaped her.

"You're so beautiful when you're wet," he said and slid two fingers inside her.

Alexandra cried out from the skillful pressure rising up through her pussy. Shaking with need, she spread her knees farther apart, desperate to take in as much of him as possible. She knew they didn't have a condom, but she stopped caring as Tristan began circling his fingers within her, stimulating each inch of her most sensitive nerves. A gush of warm arousal rewarded him.

Alexandra dropped her head, her long hair clinging to her wet cheekbones as his fingers continued their magic. Surrendering to the tension swelling inside her, she groaned and gripped the ceramic tiles, twisting her hips to meet his hand. As his thumb fluttered over her clit, a delicious sensation filled her body. She dissolved into a warm, throbbing orgasm around his fingers.

Tristan smiled at her blissful expression. "That was just the warm-up," he said as he withdrew his fingers. "No, don't get up." Carefully, he lifted himself out and sat on the edge of the tub.

In the diffused light, his cock was silkier and more golden than she remembered from the club. Somehow it seemed twice as large at eye-level. With a swallow of nervous anticipation, Alexandra brushed its swollen scarlet head across her mouth. She could smell his musk, clean and salty.

Tentatively she sucked him in between her lips, momentarily overwhelmed by the wide girth of him. At the first taste of his heat, desire slammed through her.

"That's it," he encouraged softly. "Just keep sucking..."

Bolstered, she swallowed more of his erection, running her tongue up and down his shaft. It had been so long since she'd done this. Now she joyfully acquainted herself with the width and smoothness of his shaft beneath her tongue. Tightly, she sucked his head, making him moan, then swirled her tongue around his most sensitive spot. At the same time, she began to gingerly play with his balls, which were high and tight with the need to come. Lightly, she scratched him with her nails, and he groaned appreciatively in response.

As she moved into a steady rhythm of sucking, Tristan's fingers returned to the soft slickness between her legs. "Keep going," he ordered softly. "I want to feel you come with my cock in your mouth."

Her pussy ached with need under his fingers. Trying to concentrate on the task at hand, she stimulated his swollen head with her lips and tongue. But his fingers were teasing her into a frenzy, rubbing her clit until she could barely think or do anything but

moan around his cock. "That's right, keep moaning," he whispered. "I can feel the vibrations on my skin." Expertly he moved his fingers inside her, touching with fire nerves she hadn't known she had. "Come for me, Alexandra..."

Helplessly, desperately, her own tension rising with the lust tightening his balls, she sucked him harder and faster. Then he gently squeezed her clit, and her orgasm slammed through her, flooding her thighs with wet warmth just as his sweet cum flooded her mouth.

"Oh god..." Tristan arched his back in a long, guttural groan. His fingers were still curled inside her as his cock slid from her mouth.

Alexandra collapsed back in the water, her thighs shaking too hard to sustain a kneeling position any longer. Tristan heaved a long, contented sigh, then began to towel off her long, wet hair.

A firm knock on the door shook the chair lodged beneath the doorknob. "Hello! Alexandra, Tristan, you've been in there a very long time." Chandra's voice was a caustic reprimand. "I'm going to have to ask you to bring your day to a close *right now*."

They looked at each other and burst into laughter. "Russell definitely told her to harass us, I have no doubt," Tristan said as he got to his feet. "Oh well, there's nothing either of them can do now."

Alexandra's shyness returned as she climbed out of the tub and slipped into her robe. Their date was officially over, and she felt as if they'd barely gotten started. So what came next? She'd lost all track of time, but she guessed it was early evening. Tomorrow was her date with Diego, but she'd think about that later. Right now she wanted to continue the night with Tristan.

"Excuse me, but I must insist you open this door right now!" Chandra snapped through the door.

"Good Christ." Tristan removed the chair and swung the door wide open, making Chandra jump back. "We're leaving, we're leaving. Oh, and tell Russell we had a *great* time today. He'll know what that means."

Alexandra was still snickering as she headed back into changing area. Quickly, she put on some light makeup and dried her hair with a blowdryer until it was dry enough to go into the winter night. Tristan was waiting for her in the lobby, dressed in the jeans and black jacket he'd worn to the store. A contented smile stretched across his face.

"You know, today was pretty cool," he said. "I never had fun like this with Russell. Not with Billy, either."

"Billy?"

"My ex-boyfriend in my unit."

She knew exactly what he meant. Being with him was kind of like being with a childhood pal, someone fun and silly she could relax with. "I was thinking the same thing about my ex-husband."

He hugged her against him as they walked through the reception area. "So now what? You hungry?"

"Starving." They'd eaten the fruit and cheese plate hours ago. She wanted something hot and substantial like pasta or a meatball sub.

The hostess stopped them at the doors with a strange, nervous smile. "You two are positively glowing! I'm so glad you enjoyed your day here at Bella Luna. Did you realize that, ah, another guest had decided to join you?"

Alexandra and Tristan glanced at each other. Before they could ask who, a familiar deep voice echoed through the lobby. "Hey."

It was Diego. He stood up from a leather couch with a sheepish smile, towering over them. "I know it's a bit late, but I changed my mind about being invited. Too late, apparently."

The three of them hesitated in an awkward silence that stretched on too long. Part of Alexandra was annoyed at Diego cutting in once again on her time with Tristan, when he would have her all to himself tomorrow. At the same time, just one look in his eyes connected her with that electrical current that seemed to always circulate between them. A vision of Diego in the hot tub, buff and naked and touching her everywhere, flashed through her mind.

"No, you're not too late at all," Tristan said casually. "Come out and eat with us. And then I think I'll let you two go on home, since you've got your big ski date tomorrow."

They walked out into the brisk winter night and down the block toward an Italian place Diego knew. Soon they were laughing over mozzarella sticks and spicy calamari, hot, wonderfully fried food that was the perfect antidote to the austerity of Bella Luna. *The three of us get along so well*, Alexandra reflected as she washed up in the restroom after dinner. When they said goodbye outside, she couldn't help wondering when she would see Tristan again. But she put it out of her mind. The rest of the weekend would belong to Diego.

Chapter Seven

The winter night was slowly relinquishing the sky to day when Alexandra awoke shortly after five a.m. She stared at the red glowing numbers on her bedside clock, knowing she should try to go back to sleep. The limo was picking her up at ten; she needed to be well rested for the day of winter sports ahead. And the night of indoor sports with Diego, of course.

Diego. It seemed impossible that after all this time, they were going to spend a night together. Their two previous encounters had been so spontaneous and rapid that later they'd seemed like an explosive flash of a dream. Tonight they would be naked and locked alone in a bedroom, with hours to explore each other at their leisure.

Something squirmed deep inside her at the thought. Alexandra sighed and threw off the blanket. She knew future sleep would be impossible.

She got out of bed and made a cup of almond tea, then took a leisurely, hot shower. After making sure Pasquale had enough cat chow and water to last him until her return tomorrow, she packed a bag full of outfits appropriate for both playing in the snow outside and seducing Diego inside. After spending yesterday's date in a thick spa robe, then naked and covered in goo, she was determined to look her best today.

Desire surged through her as she thought of Tristan in the hot tub yesterday. He'd looked so sexy as he massaged and rubbed her down in the water, then made her come so expertly with his fingers. Just the memory of his cock in her mouth made her blush. All the same, their day had been incomplete, and they both felt it, she was sure. She needed a deeper, fuller sexual experience with him, the kind she was about to enjoy with Diego. But would she have the chance? She and Diego were about to cement their relationship in a very physical, serious way. Come sunrise tomorrow, Diego might well expect her to commit to him and relinquish her budding relationship with Tristan.

That wasn't something she was sure she could do. She'd spent the last year struggling with her attraction to Diego because she thought he was too unreliable and promiscuous to trust. Now that he was proving himself to be all she wanted and more, she knew she should jump into his arms and not look back. Tristan was too young and unpredictable, a bad news stripper who'd skidded into their lives a few weeks ago and put their hormones in a whirl. He was fling material: nothing more. She'd be a fool to risk Diego's heart just to have more sex with Tristan.

But she suspected that was exactly what she might do. Because going back even farther than her attraction to Diego were the years of her stifling marriage in suburbia, when boredom and repression seemed like the requisite price to pay for stability. After Conrad left her, she swore she would never sacrifice her own desires for security. She'd missed out on too many adventures over the years. So damned if she was going to miss out on another one with a luscious boy like Tristan.

Her phone rang, startling her. It was only a little after seven. "Hope I didn't wake you," Diego said. He sounded strained. "I just wanted to remind you the limo will be at your building at ten."

"I know. I'll be ready."

"See you then." He hung up without saying goodbye. Almost as if he felt as nervous

as she did.

The suitcase she lugged outside at ten o'clock was ridiculously overpacked for just an overnight trip, but she hoped Diego wouldn't notice. Luckily the driver made no comment as he stowed it in the vehicle, and she slid into the limo with a bright smile. "Hi!"

As she looked at Diego, all of the neutral conversation topics she'd prepared deserted her mind. Suddenly she felt weak, almost shaky.

He looked so good in the expensive overcoat thrown over his jeans and sweater. Drumming his fingertips on his knee, he smiled a slow, dirty smile that told her he remembered clearly the last time they'd been in a limo.

"Pack enough?"

She blushed. "I wasn't sure of what to bring."

It was a cold morning, and she wanted him to sweep his arm around her and let her snuggle against him as they often did in cabs. Instead he handed her an iced caramel latte, her favorite drink.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem."

It was if they were strangers. Okay, she thought, so this is a little weird, the two of us knowing we're going to have sex tonight after being just friends for the last year. She tried to think of a way to distract him.

"I've got good news for you," he said. "Corporate emailed both me and Lynnette this morning—they're going to offer you the counter manager job this week."

Happiness flooded her like inner sunlight. "Diego, that's great!"

She reached over to hug him. His body was curiously stiff. Embarrassed, she sat back on her side of the seat.

For the first time ever, they didn't seem to have much to say to each other. Instead, they listened to the classical music piped out of the back speakers as the limo left the city and headed into the snowy countryside. As they headed toward the distant shape of mountains, Alexandra watched the passing landscape with interest. Soon they were passing a row of evergreens that led into a postcard of a quaint European village: old-fashioned chalets and buildings all facing a central town square. White lights twinkled on wooden fences and gas lamps. In the distance, tiny shapes of skiers dotted the mountains. All of it was surrounded by dark green pine forests.

"This is so beautiful!" she gasped. "I can't believe we're going to spend the night here."

Diego leaned against her to peer out the window. "And it's all ours, from now until noon tomorrow. We can go skiing, snowboarding or snow-tubing, or even swimming in the big indoor pool."

She gave him an odd look. "Really? You want to do all that outdoor stuff? I thought..."

"You thought we'd just fuck like animals all day and night?" His green eyes gleamed with his usual sarcastic humor. "Really, Lex, show some restraint. You can't just throw me in bed and use me like the village bicycle, you know."

Blushing furiously again, she looked back outside. Yes, her thoughts had been entirely on their bedroom activities. But damned if she was going to let him know that. "I just didn't think you were so ... athletic."

The subtle jibe had its intended effect. He scoffed and sat back. "I'll show you who's athletic. You won't be able to keep up with me."

Great. Now he was going to wear himself out on the slopes and be too tired to perform in bed later.

The limo pulled up to their hotel. Alexandra let Diego take care of the details as they checked in and were shown to their luxurious suite. Much to her pleasure, they had a wooden deck with an outdoor hot tub, along with a fireplace inside. But they didn't linger. Instead, they changed into their boots and snow clothes and embarked on a tour with a resort guide. Alexandra forgot to worry about anything as she stared in awe at the ski lift, the towering mountains and the graceful snowboarders flying through the air.

"Your date comes with one free ski lesson," the guide said. "I can sign you up right now if you're interested—"

Diego cut him off. "We don't want to waste time on lessons," he said. "We'll just start with the snow tubing area."

There was a lift for that too, as it turned out. As they rose into the air, Alexandra took a deep breath of cold mountain air. From here, she could see almost everything—skiers, snowboarders, forests and the resort in the middle of it all like a small village. Off to the west she could see long midair lines like telephone wires that soared above the forest; as she watched, someone hooked up to one of the wires went sailing through the air. Her eyes widened. Was that even safe? She was way too afraid of heights to do something like that. All the same, she twisted back in the lift to watch them with fascination.

Diego nudged her, drawing her attention to the other side of the mountain now, where the snow had been plowed in six wide lanes. People sailed down them in a variety of tubes, either solo or in groups of two or three.

"This looks beyond cool." Alexandra felt as excited as a little kid. She recalled her epiphany yesterday—that she'd never had fun like this when she was married. At the time, she'd assumed that being adult and stable meant turning her back on adventure. Now she made a silent deal with herself to never do that again. "You know, I'm actually glad now I went through with that stupid auction."

Diego looked at her steadily. "And what if you hadn't?"

"Huh?"

"If the auctions hadn't happened. If we hadn't met Tristan. Would we still be at Maxwell's right now, pretending not to want each other?"

Uncomfortable, she looked down, fidgeting with her gloves. She didn't know the answer to that. "Probably."

"I put it on the table more than once, Lex."

"Yes, but only to have sex. You offered yourself up like some kind of human vibrator. You knew I wasn't into sleeping around, you knew I'd say no."

She forced herself to meet his eyes. A light breeze blew his black hair around his jaw and his cheeks were cherry red from the cold. His green eyes were bright against the snow. He hadn't shaved that morning, and the black stubble gracing his jaw made him look even more dark and dangerous than usual.

She bit her lip. Goddamn but he was one magnificently sexy man.

"I didn't want to scare you away." His gaze was steadfast and intense. "You told me you didn't trust anyone after getting dumped by your husband, and it was pretty obvious you weren't ready to even go on a date with someone, let alone accept someone like

me—”

He broke off and looked out over the mountains, away from her.

“Hey.” She pulled his jaw back toward her. “What do you mean, someone like you? Someone who does sleep around? Who makes people fall in love with him and then walks out on them without a second thought?”

“That is not who I am!” His eyes flashed. “I can’t help it if people want me. Christ, I don’t enjoy hurting anyone. But it’s rare for me to stay interested past a few dates, and I’m not going to live a lie.”

She could read the veracity of that in his eyes. Fair enough. “Then what did you mean, someone like you?”

He shrugged stiffly. “Someone bisexual. Someone who’s been around. All of it. It was obvious we had chemistry, and yet, since you kept your distance—” He broke off and stared down at his feet. “I thought my lifestyle was why. And then we met Tristan, and you couldn’t get enough of him.”

Ah. Now she understood everything.

“Tristan was just a fantasy,” she told him. “At first, I mean. He didn’t scare me like you did because he was just a stripper, not part of my world. You’re my good friend. And the truth is that you’ve got this energy that’s kind of overwhelming, Diego.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “Really?”

“Oh, definitely,” she said, warming to the theme. “When you walk into Maxwell’s, everyone stops talking to stare at you. You’re so passionate, so—bold. You intimidated me in a way he never could.”

“Really? Does that mean you’re done with him?”

She stared into his eyes. Time to tell the truth, no matter what it cost her. “No,” she said. “No, I still want to see him again.”

They’d reached the end of the lift. One of the staff unlocked it and helped them out.

“Good,” Diego said. “Because I invited him along today, and oh, here he is.”

Alexandra whirled around to find Tristan towering over her with those adorable dimples.

“Hey, sexy,” he said and leaned down to kiss her.

The next two hours passed in a blur. They went down the mountain in thick rubber tubes both individually and together, holding each other and screaming with pleasure as they whirled in fast, dizzying circles. Alexandra was soon soaked through her clothes, her socks icy and wet, yet she was having too much fun to care. Over and over, she went flying down the slopes, giddy as a child.

A thick gray pall soon darkened the afternoon. “Going to snow,” Tristan predicted, looking up at the sky. Sure enough, within five minutes, heavy wet flakes began to spiral down to melt upon their cheeks.

“Maybe we should take a break for now,” Diego suggested, squinting into the distance. “We can come back out later if we want, but I wouldn’t mind putting on some dry clothes first.”

They headed back to the hotel. Alexandra didn’t miss the lustful glances that the other resort guests shot both men. *And they’re both mine*, she thought proudly. Yet in fact, she wasn’t sure right now who belonged to whom. What were they expecting tonight? She’d been in both men’s arms over the last week, though she’d yet to have actual sex with either of them. Did they know that? Were they planning on sleeping with

each other tonight? The thought of that would normally make her jealous, yet now it seemed strangely exciting.

She glanced up at them, both so tall, so good-looking. Both men walked with a confidence that radiated the promise of pleasure. Of course they'd be attracted to each other. Why else would Diego have invited Tristan as a surprise today?

At last they entered the warmth of their room. While Diego built a fire, Alexandra carefully took off her snowy gloves and boots and set them by the radiator to dry. Tristan did the same.

Alexandra hesitated. She wanted to strip off her wet clothes but felt silly going into the bathroom to change, and awkward changing in front of them. She turned around. To her surprise, Diego was undressing right there by the fire. She stood still, unable to take her eyes from him as he casually pulled off his sweater, then unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down his hard thighs. At last he slid down his underwear, revealing a blood-engorged cock that tilted up toward his taut belly.

Lust shot through her like a high voltage shock.

He was naked. Finally, at last, Diego Garcia was naked in front of her, six feet four of hard, bronzed muscle. She'd imagined this moment so many times, and now that it was here, his magnificently male body looked even more mouthwatering in the firelight than she could possibly have pictured. She drank in the width of his chest, lightly covered with black hair, and the tapering V of his torso, finished by the upright stiffness of his long cock. There wasn't an inch on him that she would have changed.

"I feel like a hot shower," Diego said casually. "Anyone want to join me?"

Tristan laughed shyly. "Sounds good to me."

Her gaze immediately swung to Tristan, who pulled off his clothes with a coy smile. As he undressed, Alexandra couldn't help contrasting their bodies. Tristan was leaner, with narrower hips, both his chest and crotch waxed smooth for stripping. Diego was hairier and broader, more muscular, his dominant masculinity reminding her as always of a black leopard on the prowl. He was so classically handsome, his cheekbones and lips almost too perfect, still ready to grace a fashion spread in any magazine. Tristan's punk rock hair, tattoos and pierced nipples, on the other hand, made him the ultimate bad boy from head to toe.

They both fixed their gazes on her.

Right. Her turn. Apparently being comfortable naked with them was something she'd have to master quickly. Forcing a nervous smile, she unsnapped her bra and slowly slid it off, enjoying the hot light in their eyes as she shook her breasts free. Then she teasingly slid off her panties, keeping her legs together so they couldn't see quite as much as they wanted to.

Diego's eyes burned with green fire. He took a step toward her, but she held up a hand to stop him. "Uh uh. Shower time."

She followed them into the bathroom, admiring the view of two firm male butts marching ahead of her. Yet as soon as she joined them in the big spa shower, Tristan moved aside and quickly pushed her between them.

"Hey!"

"Hush," Diego said, slapping her breasts lightly. "You're the reason we're here, remember? We shelled out a lot of money for this date, Tristan and I."

"Yeah, we did," he echoed.

“So you can be damned sure we’re going to get our money’s worth.” Diego grinned evilly. “You’re going to do exactly what we say.”

“The hell I am!”

She tried to squirm away as Tristan grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back. It was to no avail. Now she was completely exposed and at Diego’s mercy as he fondled her breasts with a crude smirk. “Don’t pretend you’re not enjoying this,” he told her. “Any woman would love to have two guys all to herself.”

As long as the two guys were you two, she thought but refused to say. “I didn’t ask you to bid on my date,” she reminded him saucily. In truth, she was struck by how gorgeous Diego looked wet and disheveled in the shower. His black hair was plastered to his cheeks, his dark skin flushed from the hot water. The stubble on his jaw made her think of that roughness brushing her thighs, and she blushed.

“Oh, I see. Ungrateful, are we?” Diego pulled her nipples out from her body, teasing them until they were stiffer and pinker than they had ever been. “Well, it doesn’t matter. We’re still going to use your body however we want.”

Abruptly, he reached between her legs and stroked her pussy. It felt so good and unexpected that she sagged back against Tristan and cried out with pleasure. The stiff prod of his erection into her bottom only reminded her that she had two hard cocks at her disposal tonight. Her sex flooded with a creamy heat as Diego continued to tickle her.

“What a little slut,” he said to Tristan.

“No kidding,” Tristan said. “I say we do all kinds of nasty things to her.”

They pushed her directly under the hot water, its spray blinding her as she tried to free her arms. But Tristan held her wrists together in a tight grip. Sightless, she wiggled helplessly as multiple hands now fingered her ass, rubbed her clit and forced her legs open wider. Someone, she wasn’t sure who, sucked both her nipples before biting them gently. Moaning, she tried to escape the water coursing into her face. But she was blind as their fingers worked her into mindless, reeling ecstasy.

Electric tension gathered low in her body. She groaned as prickling excitement built in her body. Any second now she would—

Suddenly, she was lifted out of the shower and placed dripping wet on the cold bathroom tiles. Dazed and baffled, she blinked the water from her eyes. “What the hell?” she cried.

“Oh what? You thought you were going to come that easily?” Diego lazily sauntered past her, toweling off with a royal blue bath towel. “Think again.”

Tristan quickly rubbed her down with another towel, squeezing the water out of her long, sodden hair. “Yeah, an orgasm is a privilege you’ll have to earn tonight. Since we’re the ones who paid for this.”

She pushed the towel away to glare at him. “I was on the verge!”

Tristan merely laughed and pushed her wet hair in her face. “Like we care.” He gripped her wrists together in one hand again. “March.”

He forced her to walk ahead of him out of the bathroom. Here at least the warmth of the fire comforted her a little bit. She shook her hair from her eyes, but it was a useless gesture; Diego pushed her down on the floor. “All fours.”

Oh no. She knew what was coming. She’d fantasized about it even, but not so soon, not right away. They were treating her like a common sex slave, someone to use and discard. She gave a tiny groan of complaint, afraid to protest verbally, as one of them

kicked her heels apart, forcing her legs wide open. She tensed, waiting for the telltale rip of a condom foil.

Instead both men crouched down behind her. One light finger ran over her pussy, pushing aside her folds and opening her slit a bit. "She does have a pretty one," Diego said. The finger slipped inside her, just an inch, and began rubbing slowly where she was tightest. "Sensitive too. I fingered her the night of the bachelor auction, and she was practically having a seizure from just one finger."

Indignation scalded her cheeks. "I was not!"

"I already told you to hush." A hand firmly slapped her left butt cheek. "No talking. Now... Anyhow, like I said, she's dying for it. She's going to let us do whatever we want to her, no matter how degrading it is. She'll probably beg for more."

She hated them for talking about her this way. She hated how much it turned her on, being so casually explored and discussed as if she wasn't even here. She struggled to stay still and obedient, praying they would push another finger in, or better yet, a thick, throbbing cock.

Instead, they both laughed. "Look how wet she's getting," Tristan said. "Wow, she's really horny."

"She hasn't been fucked in a long time," Diego said. "I can't say I'm surprised she's like this. Anyhow..."

To her vast disappointment, the finger retreated. One of them walked away. Who? She knew if she turned around or tried to look behind her, they'd punish her. Yet nothing prepared her for the odd clicking sound that followed when he returned and squatted down behind her again.

The clicking repeated. With horrified recognition, she realized they were taking dirty pictures of her.

"Hey! Wait! I didn't say you could—"

Immediately, they rolled her onto her back. She struggled to get up, but Tristan firmly pushed her back down. "Spread your legs. Your little modeling shoot isn't over yet."

"What? No! My face will be in the shots!"

Diego tapped her clit. "That's your fault for acting up. If you had just stayed still and facing forward, no one would have known it was you." He showed the last picture to Tristan, who grinned and nodded. He snapped his fingers. "Come on. Open your legs for the camera, or Tristan will hold you down."

"No way! What if they end up on the Internet?"

Diego and Tristan exchanged one look. A second later Tristan was at her head, holding her arms down while Diego took her ankles and spread them. Then he began taking picture after picture of her naked body while waves of red-hot excitement washed through her. No one was even touching her, yet her nipples were heavy and aching with arousal. A mounting delirium pulsed lightly in her pussy. If either of them started playing with her now, she would explode.

"What a little exhibitionist," Diego murmured. "And all this time I thought you were so shy."

Tristan released her arms and slid forward to cup her breasts. Tenderly, he stroked her nipples until she arched her back and groaned. Aware of Diego's camera but lost to all caution, she desperately reached between her legs and began to touch her clit, flinging

her legs open as wide as she could. Her pussy felt hotter and wetter than ever as Diego aimed his camera between her legs. Her excitement mounted higher and higher until she felt something new: two of Diego's fingers. He slid them deep inside her, stroking upward in just the right spot until she screamed with pure orgasmic joy, hot fluid gushing out to soak his hand and the rug.

She went limp in mindless euphoria, her body quivering with blissful after shocks. She was too dazed to think or move or do anything but revel in this rich, sensual ecstasy.

"Fuck me, that was hot," Tristan said. "Did you really get that all on camera?"

"Oh yeah. I activated the video function." Diego tossed his phone to the side and sat back, a look of pure satisfaction on his face. "That was better than the best porn in the world."

Tristan laughed dirtily. "Yeah, it was." He reared on his knees, showing off his hard cock to both Alexandra and Diego. "Look what it did to me."

Alexandra took a long look at it. Yes, there was the smooth and beautiful cock she'd sucked last night, as hard and swollen as she remembered. This time, though, Tristan was looking at Diego. Who was kneeling and stroking his own massive erection.

She got up on her elbows to watch. "Rub your cocks together," she ordered.

"Hey, you don't talk," Diego said. "You're still under our command, no matter how well you just performed."

But Tristan was already crawling toward him. "Actually, I think our little slave has a good idea," he said. He took Diego's hand and wrapped it around his shaft, then took Diego's cock in his hand. Staring into each other's eyes, the two men began to stroke each other, their fists gradually moving faster and faster until they'd pressed their penises together and were stroking them as one. Alexandra watched with her mouth open, scarcely able to take in how sexy they both looked, still wet from the shower but glowing in the firelight, their stiff cocks not quite covered by their hands.

Diego abruptly pushed Tristan down. "Enough of this," he said, gripping the sides of his head by the hair. "Suck me."

Excited, Alexandra sat straight up to watch. This was the show of her secret dreams, one hot man using his mouth on another. Her stomach tightened as Tristan knelt between his legs and slid his mouth down over Diego's thick shaft. Diego threw back his head and groaned as Tristan began to suck the head of his cock.

Diego fell back on his hands and spread his thighs open, while Tristan began to play with his balls. "Oh fuck, I'm going to come soon," Diego breathed. "Don't stop."

Alexandra checked Tristan's own cock. It was so engorged it was a deep scarlet. Softly she slid behind him, reached around his hips and began to pump his shaft. He made a soft choking noise before continuing to lick and suck Diego's cock. Alexandra glanced up and met Diego's gaze in a moment of hot, wordless understanding. Then Diego bit his lip, threw back his head again and howled, his hips bucking furiously as he pumped his orgasm into Tristan's face.

He fell back and sprawled on the carpet with the contentment of a lion who had just fed.

Right away, Tristan threw Alexandra's hand off his cock. Scrambling across the carpet to grope around in his discarded pants, he quickly rolled a condom down over his shaft. He turned around, shoved her down on the floor and mounted her. Without a word, he pushed deep inside her, demanding and unrelenting.

A primitive cry escaped Alexandra. It had been so long since she'd felt a man thrusting inside her, fucking her, driving her straight into throbbing wetness. She wrapped her legs around his waist and cupped his firm ass, reveling in the sensation. Tristan was fucking her hard and fast, like a sex demon intent on breaking her open. And though she'd come just shortly before, a wild storm was already gathering again between her legs.

Tristan clenched his fists in her hair. "So good," he groaned. "God, you feel like heaven."

He got up on his knees, lifted her hips up for a better angle, then plunged even deeper inside her. Alexandra cried out again, feeling as if she was being penetrated more intensely than she'd ever been in her life. Two hands cupped her breasts and began playing with her nipples: Diego, kneeling at her head. She twisted and thrashed between her two men, aroused beyond endurance. Tristan began to moan and gasp, driving into her harder, and then it was happening, both of them coming together in drenching fire.

He fell down beside her, the three of them a mess of tangled limbs and damp hair. Diego gently stroked her stomach, fanning their overheated skin. For a few minutes, there was only the sound of their breath.

"Wow," Tristan said finally. His voice was hoarse. "I've been waiting a long time for that."

A pang of guilt went through Alexandra. She looked up at Diego, checking for signs that he was bitter at not being the first to have sex with her. He shook his head with an understanding smile. "It's okay," he told her. "We'll have our turn."

Tristan bounded off naked through the dark room and began rummaging through the minibar. Alexandra sighed deeply and curled into Diego's side. As he stroked her hair, she reflected that however unhappy the years of her marriage had been, this weekend was more than making up for it.

Tristan returned with a chilled bottle of water and a tray of fruit. "It's already five o'clock," he said, pouring the water. "Our dinner reservation is for eight. If we want to go back outside tonight, we'd better go out now."

Alexandra stretched. Part of her wanted to lay right here naked by the fire, but she was curious to explore the rest of the resort. "What do you guys feel like doing? I don't know how to ski, although the date gives us a free lesson. But what I really want to do is check out the high-wire thing over the forest."

"High wire thing?" Diego and Tristan both shot her an odd look. She suppressed a laugh. For two such different men, they had very similar reactions sometimes.

"I don't know what it's called, but it looks fun. They hook you up to something like a telephone wire, and you go flying through the air. Let's call the staff, they'll know."

An odd tension crossed Tristan's face. "We can find it on our own, Lex." He began to get dressed.

She did the same, slipping into long underwear, jeans and a heavy sweater. "Regardless, I'd like to find a guide like we had earlier. I want to get a map of this place, make sure we aren't missing anything."

Tristan's laugh sounded forced. "After being smothered to death at the spa yesterday, do you really want to do that?"

"Yes," she said, puzzled. "What's the big deal?"

"Nothing, I just don't think we need to get the staff involved." He pulled on his

jacket, sat down and began to lace his boots.

Alexandra and Diego exchanged a confused look. She could tell he had picked up on Tristan's abrupt shift in mood as well, but she decided to just drop it. She handed Diego his scarf, and they followed Tristan out.

Outside the hotel, the resort village square was busy with activity. A heavy winter twilight had descended, but the gloom was broken by a massive log fire, surrounded by resort guests sipping hot chocolate and coffee. A variety of small shops and cafes were nestled between the other chalets with a band playing nearby, while everyone watched skiers make their final runs down the slopes. Alexandra headed to one of the outdoor snack bars, intent on ordering a cup of tea.

Tristan tugged her back. "Come on, we'd better hurry. Otherwise we won't get back in time for dinner."

She shook off his arm. "Tristan, we have plenty of time. What is your problem?"

"Me," a familiar voice answered. "I'm the problem."

Alexandra spun around to find Hunter standing before them, a pair of long skis under his arm. His cheeks were bright red from the cold, his blond hair hidden by a ski cap. Only his bright blue eyes identified him as the cute stripper at Heartbreakers who had given her the first lap dance that night.

She was too astonished to speak. Hunter smiled. "Guess you don't remember my telling you that I was a ski instructor."

"More like a ski bum," Tristan snapped, stepping forward. "Look, you weren't invited on this date, asshole. I'm sure Russell told you to keep tabs on us—"

"He may have said something like that."

"Well, tough shit. If you don't turn around right now, I'm reporting you to management. We're guests here, and you can't harass us."

Alexandra cut him off with one gloved hand. "Hold on. Hunter, you actually work here?" She remembered now how mysterious he had seemed about seeing her again at the auction. He'd known all along they'd be running into each other.

"I give ski lessons, yes. Normally, I just work during the week—"

"But Russell asked you to change your schedule so you could spy on us," Tristan finished. "Well, screw you."

"Tristan, just calm down. You think I care what Russell wants? Yes, he asked, but I only agreed in exchange for a nice little bonus. I have no plans to sabotage you." His eyes lingered on Alexandra in a particularly lascivious way.

Tristan snorted. "Classic Hunter. Always looking out for number one."

"You're the one who dated the sneaky bastard," Hunter pointed out, casually popping a mint in his mouth. "Look, I just came over to say hi and no hard feelings. And offer to show you around, if you want." He winked at Alexandra. She couldn't help grinning in return. Hunter was as devious as they came, but he looked just too cute in his ski cap to resist.

Tristan noticed and bristled. "Alexandra is with us, Hunter. Don't even think about hitting on her."

Hunter spread his hands. "Who's hitting on anyone? Sheesh, I would have thought you three had already banged each other's brains out by now. Why are you so easily threatened?"

The two men stared at each other. Tristan turned and stalked off through the snow

toward the pine trees. "I'll go talk to him," Diego told them under his breath.

Alexandra and Hunter began to follow at a distance. "Okay," Alexandra said in a low voice. "One of you needs to come out with it. Why are you two so competitive with each other? It can't just be stripper rivalry."

Hunter's smile twisted into something ugly. "If I tell you, he'll really hate me."

"Hunter, come on. You two are like toddlers in a sandbox fighting over the same truck."

He shrugged. "It's no big deal. A couple of months ago, when he was still new, we got hired to work a bachelorette party. The bride-to-be took us in her bedroom for a dual lap dance and uh, things got out of hand."

Jealousy flared up in her. Tristan had told her she was the first woman he'd had since Iraq. "Both of you had sex with her?"

"No. She just, uh, wanted us to do things to each other that I wasn't into. Like I said, I'm straight. He, however, was more than eager, and he's never forgiven me for rejecting him."

Hmm. Maybe that story was true, and maybe it wasn't. She'd definitely have to get Tristan's side of it. "That doesn't explain why you lied about him being gay the night I met you both at Heartbreakers."

"I wanted you for myself. All the women customers like Tristan. It's goddamned annoying."

Night had fallen. She could still hear the joyful shouts of night skiers and snowboarders, but the smoky scent of the fire was giving way to crisp forest air. Away from the city's light pollution, the dark navy sky glittered with stars. Alexandra took a deep breath of the cold clean air just as Tristan and Diego came back to them. She could tell from their expressions that Diego had calmed Tristan down a little, but not much.

"Okay," Tristan said forcefully. "You want to show us around? Take us to this high-wire thing she wants to go on. But that's it. We're spending the rest of the night alone."

"The Zip Trek? Sure, it's over on the other side." Hunter stopped another instructor and handed him his skis to carry back to the resort. Then he led them off into the night, away from the music and shouts of the resort village square.

Ten minutes later, Alexandra was standing high above the trees on a wooden platform. Her palms were sweating inside her gloves, but she couldn't chicken out now. The guys were standing behind her, waiting for her to go first. Yet the massive drop to the ground made her stomach squirm.

Hunter securely fastened her into a rope and metal harness. He smelled fantastic, like a combination of snow and warm skin and cologne, and she was partly tempted to nestle into him and never let go. *Quit being greedy, Alexandra. You already have two men, you don't need a third!*

"The Zip Trek isn't like hang-gliding. There's no skill involved," he said. "Once I release you, you'll go all the way down the zipline to the end. Just relax and enjoy it, okay? No worries."

"Okay." She glanced back nervously at Diego, who nodded encouragingly. He knew she'd always been afraid of heights. That just made her more determined to prove she could do it.

"You're all set." Before she could hesitate, Hunter launched her in motion.

Alexandra plunged forward. She sailed through the air, the night chill rushing past

her face. As she glided down the zipline, the moonlit pine trees and glittering snow passed beneath her like a magic forest. She screamed with laughter and joy. Soon the trees gave way to an open valley of snow melting into a rushing river. Alexandra caught her breath as she took in the panoramic view around her. She was so high above the ground, high enough that if she fell she would surely die. Terror filled her for just a moment, and she shut her eyes. Then she summoned her courage and opened them and let the thrill of flying fill her once again.

She reached the end all too soon. Another resort guide helped her out of her harness in time to see Diego coming toward them. His black hair fanned out behind him like a vampire's as he soared through the air. That old awestruck admiration she felt every time he walked into Maxwell's filled her once again. These last few weeks had been so tumultuous that she'd almost forgotten to appreciate the miracle of simply having him at last.

His eyes glowed with excitement as he landed. "That was incredible."

"Mind-blowing!" Alexandra agreed. "We definitely need to do that again."

"Me too, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow if we want to make our dinner reservation."

She glanced at the zipline. "Where's Tristan? Wasn't he right behind you?"

Diego frowned. "I thought he was."

A shape came through the darkness. To their surprise, it was a woman they didn't recognize. Her husband was right behind her. Exchanging a worried look, Diego and Alexandra climbed down and looked around, but neither Tristan nor Hunter were in sight.

"One of them probably strangled the other off in the trees," Diego joked.

"Diego, don't say that. What if they did get in a fight? You know Tristan can't stand him."

Diego gave her a skeptical look. "Lex, come on. Tristan's not the problem here. Hunter's cute and all, but he's a little bitch. Tristan told me what happened between them—"

"Yeah, well, so did Hunter. And I'm guessing their stories don't match. What did Tristan say?"

"That they were giving a dual lap dance to a woman and fooled around. And Hunter totally denied it back at the club and told everyone that Tristan hit on him."

"Hunter told me he's totally straight."

"Straight, right. So straight he gives men naked lap dances for a living." Diego rolled his eyes. "Come on, let's head back. It's cold, and it's getting late."

They found Tristan back in the room when they arrived. He was already dressed for dinner and staring into the flames with a brooding expression. "Thanks for waiting for us," Alexandra said saucily. She threw her wet gloves at him.

He smiled awkwardly and got to his feet. "Sorry. Hunter was acting like a dick, and I didn't trust him to strap me into that thing. He'd probably rig it so I fell out and died halfway through. You guys ready for dinner?"

"Yes," Diego said, pulling off his coat. "Just give me one minute."

To Alexandra's disbelief, Diego was dressed and combing his hair in the blink of an eye. "Why don't you two go down without me and get the table?" she suggested. "It's going to take me a few minutes to get ready."

She felt a sense of relief after they left. Now she could primp in peace. Besides, she

needed some alone time to adjust to everything that had happened today and what was no doubt still to come. As she blow-dried her damp hair, her thoughts turned to Tristan. He certainly was a moody one, more inclined to keep his feelings to himself rather than share them. No doubt that was partly due to his military training, but it did make trying to understand him frustrating. Now Hunter's surprise appearance had thrown a wrench into their night. With Diego, she would simply ask him outright what was bugging him, and Diego would tell her. Tristan, she knew, wouldn't be so forthcoming about the true source of his emotional tumult.

Oh well. Somehow she would brighten his mood again, would bring this night back to its intended erotic celebration. Smiling, she changed into the dress she had brought, a tight black and scarlet gown that was transparent in some parts, beaded in others. It clung to her every curve, the bodice held together with only tiny black hooks. After doing her makeup, she regarded herself in the mirror with satisfaction. Yes, this would definitely get Tristan's mind off his problems.

When she entered the French restaurant a few minutes later, she could feel everyone's eyes turn toward her. Her eyes, of course, were locked on the two gorgeous men facing each other in a rounded booth of leather padding. Diego rose first and kissed her cheek. "You look beautiful."

"So do you." And he did, dressed to his model best in Armani, but it was Tristan's dumbstruck expression that made her want to smile. He was staring at her as if he'd never seen a woman in his life before. "So did you two order yet?"

"Just appetizers. The duck looks good."

"Tristan, what looks good to you?" She savored the awe in his eyes, the power she clearly had over him as a woman. It reminded her of just how young he was, caught between boy and man.

"Um... I don't know." He laughed awkwardly. "I'm so hungry I'll eat anything."

"Ditto," Diego said. "Flying down that Zip Trek thing gave me an appetite."

That fast, Tristan's face turned sulky. "I bet." He closed his menu.

Alexandra lost her patience. "Okay, that's enough. What is it with you and Hunter? You guys work together at the club every weekend, so you can't hate each other that much. What is the deal?"

Tristan's lips pressed together in an obstinate line. "Oh, like he didn't feed you some line of crap today? I'm sure he couldn't wait to tell you how I came on to him, and he was just so heterosexual that he was totally disgusted—"

"He may have," Alexandra said cautiously. "But obviously I'm going to believe you over him. What exactly happened?"

Tristan sighed heavily. "We were hired to work a private party. The bride asked us into her bedroom to give her a dual dance. She..." He glanced around and lowered his voice. "We both got hard, I mean, she was pretty cute. Then she asked us to jerk each other off while she watched."

Alexandra nodded. "And Hunter didn't want to?"

Tristan scoffed bitterly. "He wouldn't touch me, so I just did him. And he loved it. Mr. Straight Boy came all over the place. Then the next night I come into the club, and I hear he's been telling everyone that I practically assaulted him, and he wanted nothing to do with it. He's a goddamned liar."

"Ah." Alexandra sat back against the leather. Her gaze connected with Diego's, and

he gave her a small smile. Tristan's story had the ring of truth, but his resentment against Hunter seemed to be a bit out of proportion. Alexandra suspected he had had more of a crush on Hunter than he wanted to admit. She could tell Diego was thinking the same thing.

As if reading their expressions, Tristan said, "Look, I know it's not that big a deal. But after my ex lied about our relationship and got me kicked out of the military, I'm just a little irritated at these assholes who hide in the closet."

"Fair enough." Alexandra accepted a glass of wine from their server, as another server set down a plate of hot brie and another dish of foie gras.

Tristan still looked sulky. "You don't believe me. Look, I can prove Hunter's gay."

"Bi, you mean," Alexandra corrected, reaching for the appetizers.

"No, I mean gay. I don't think he's into girls at all. It's just a cover story."

Alexandra frowned. "Um, I don't know about that. He seemed pretty turned on with me."

"He was faking it," Tristan insisted. "It's what we do in the club, convince customers we're dying to fuck them."

Now Alexandra felt insulted. "Tristan—you weren't there, okay? I know he's attracted to me. Maybe he is into guys, but he definitely likes girls too."

Diego leaned over the table with a malicious gleam in his eyes. "Hmm. Hunter says he's straight, Lex says he's bi, and you say he's gay. Sounds like we need a sex test."

Alexandra groaned, but Tristan's eyes narrowed with intrigue. "Huh, sex test. I like the sound of that."

Diego smiled that devious smile Alexandra knew so well. "This is what we'll do. Lex will invite him up to the room. She can say that you and I are ignoring her, and she needs some straight boy attention. Once he's in the room, we'll all tempt him—and we'll see who he chooses."

He and Tristan high-fived each other. Alexandra took a long sip of her wine. This was going to be one hell of a night.

Chapter Eight

They arrived back in their suite a little before ten o'clock. Alexandra poured herself a glass of sparkling water, feeling hot and a little flustered at the idea of having Hunter in her arms again. Yes, he was sneaky and conniving, but he was undeniably luscious too. She knew it was greedy to want to add a third man to the mix tonight. Having Diego and Tristan was enough for any woman. Her loyalty definitely lay with them. Yet she couldn't deny that her lap dance with Hunter had been exciting that first night, and the thought of finishing it sent a shiver through her.

Besides, Tristan's assertion that Hunter had faked his attraction to her was a little insulting. She was determined to prove Tristan wrong.

To clear her thoughts, she stepped out onto the wooden deck. The cold night breeze felt good on her feverish skin. The heavy French dinner had left her feel indolent and sensual, after their day of winter sports and hot sex.

Tristan joined her with his phone in hand. "This is Hunter's number. Call him and tell him to come up here."

His young face was fiercely adamant. Alexandra hid her smile. "And say what? If he's as gay as you say, won't he just make an excuse?"

"Nah, he'll want to save face around me. Just flirt with him, tell him you have something to show him."

She laughed. "Stripping is your thing. I'm not a performer."

His dark eyes met hers steadily. "You put on a pretty good show earlier, as I recall."

Alexandra's heart began to thump wildly as she remembered the little video they had made on Diego's phone. She couldn't show that to Hunter, of course. She was way too shy... yet the thought of him watching it was surprisingly arousing.

With shaking fingers, she texted Hunter. *Hi, it's Lex. U feel like hanging out? Tristan and Diego r all wrapped up in each other, and I'm lonely. Plus, I have a little something I want to show you.*

He texted her back in less than a minute. *On my way. What's ur room number?*

Oh god, this was really happening. She had no idea what direction this contest was going to take, but she was pretty sure it would be an unforgettable one. She followed Tristan inside and poured more water. Diego was building a fire, his cheekbones golden in the light of the flames.

"Okay," she said. "He's coming."

Diego straightened up with a mischievous smile. "Nicely played, Lex."

She looked up at him as Tristan slipped into the bathroom. He looked so confident as always, so supremely self-assured. "Diego, be honest with me. I know this isn't anything unusual for you, but I am kind of over my head here. If it was just me here tonight, would you be bored right now?"

He looked thunderstruck. "Lex, no. I'd be thrilled just to spend the whole night alone with you. As we will in the future. If you're not comfortable with this—"

"I'm comfortable." Well, that wasn't exactly the right word. Nervous and excited and jittery were probably better words. "It's just—you know, three bi guys and one girl. I don't want to be a fourth wheel here."

He slipped his hands down her side. His emerald eyes burned in the dark. "Oh, I have a feeling you'll be the center of attention."

A knock on the door made them step apart. Alexandra took a deep breath as Diego opened it to find Hunter smiling his cocky smile. He was wearing jeans and a forest green sweater, his short blond hair catching the dance of the flames. Alexandra swallowed as the full effect of his All-American good looks hit her.

Without acknowledging Diego, Hunter came straight toward her. "You did the right thing in texting me," he said.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Because a real man would have ripped that dress off you a long time ago." His eyes lingered on the hooks of her bodice. "Goddamn, you're a fox."

"Thank you." She could scarcely conceal her smile of victory. Tristan was so wrong about him being gay.

"Ahem." Diego stepped forward with a cool expression. "There are other people in the room, you know."

Hunter had the good manners to step back and smile at Diego. "Sorry. My, uh, enthusiasm got the better of me. But don't worry—my intentions are strictly innocent."

Diego snorted, but it was lost as Tristan came out of the bathroom. Immediately, the energy in the room changed as he and Hunter looked at each other. Neither of them spoke for a moment. Then Tristan brusquely popped open a beer. "Knew you'd show up," he said before taking a long swallow.

Hunter scowled. "Don't flatter yourself. I didn't come here for you."

Tristan leaned back against the wall and drank his beer, never taking his eyes from his rival.

The tension was thick as fog. Hunter broke it by looking at Alexandra. "Look, you said you had something to show me? Or was that just a trick to get me up here?"

"No trick," she answered coolly. "We just thought you might want to see a little video that we made earlier."

Hunter's expression changed to slow, begrudging interest. He went very still as Diego casually pulled out his phone, pressed a few buttons, then handed it to him.

All of them watched as Hunter's handsome face darkened. He bit his lip a moment later. Alexandra's nipples chafed against the bodice as she recalled her earlier sex with Diego and Tristan. A bolt of dizzying desire went through her as she watched a sizeable bulge swelled in Hunter's jeans. Yep, he was definitely straight, she thought; he'd gotten hard just from watching her naked and touching herself. She had definitely won this bet.

She sauntered across the room, knowing the short video was almost at an end. Though no one had even touched her yet, her panties were already wet and clinging to her sex. As Hunter wordlessly handed the phone back to Diego, she placed one hand over his heart. Just as she expected, it was beating quickly.

"So," she said, reaching down to stroke his stiff cock through his jeans, "about those 'innocent intentions' you mentioned earlier..."

He was scarcely breathing. "Yeah?"

"Mine aren't so innocent." She gave his cock a soft squeeze.

Hunter licked his lips and swallowed, like a wolf that hadn't eaten in a long time. His heart beat faster beneath her hands.

Alexandra unzipped his jeans and emancipated the thick cock straining against his

underwear. In her hands, his shaft felt throbbingly hard and alive. She rolled her fingers around and over his head, squeezing him as intimately as if pleasing an old lover. Hunter groaned.

Reluctantly, she released him and stepped back. Standing in the firelight, she began to undo the bodice of her dress one hook at a time. All three men stared at her in lust and fascination. The dress was so tight that she had gone braless tonight, and she savored their expressions as she peeled down the top of her dress, showing them her stiff pink nipples. Someone growled under his breath, she wasn't sure who, as she slid off the rest of the dress. She stepped forward in just her black silk panties and high heels.

She beckoned Hunter forward. He charged toward her.

"You didn't win this date, you know," she reminded him as she took down his jeans and underwear. "In fact, you didn't even bid on me. That hurts."

"I wasn't allowed to bid! I'm a club employee! Otherwise—"

She laughed and cut him off with two fingers on his lips. "My point is that you have to earn your spot here. You have to do exactly what I say, understand?"

She gently shoved him onto the sofa. Hunter settled back, his blue eyes gleaming as she straddled him. Oh, this was fun. Not only was she proving just how much Hunter really wanted her, she could tell she was teasing the hell out of Tristan and Diego.

Hunter seemed transfixed by the soft grip of her thighs around his cock. "Damn, you feel good," he said hoarsely. He reached up to pull down her panties, but she brushed his fingers away. "Alexandra, come on—put me out of my misery."

She laughed softly and leaned forward just enough to tease his mouth with her breasts. He tongued her nipples roughly, sending sparks through her blood.

"Patience," she whispered, feeling another warm trickle of desire between her legs. Then she nimbly swung around and leaned close to his cock.

Hunter groaned and took her hips in his hands. With one brusque tug, he pulled off her underwear and brought her pussy firmly down on his mouth. As she gasped with excitement, he began to tongue her wetness until shivery tremors rolled through her body.

"Oh god," she moaned. "Oh Hunter..."

She forgot her original objective as he thrust his tongue deep inside her. Blissful chills filled her and made her squirm as she settled onto his face. Hunter knew exactly what to do, tonguing her clit and stroking her folds with perfect sensitivity. Incandescent euphoria filled every nerve in her body as he licked her with wild, masterful strokes.

Only the head of his cock close to her mouth reminded her that he needed attention too. She rolled her tongue around his shaft, eliciting a deep moan of appreciation, and then sealed her lips over his head. Tightly and wetly, she sucked him, her hand expertly playing with his balls. But the sensation of his tongue moving deep in her pussy was too much for her. She let his cock drop from her mouth, crying out with animal release as her orgasm broke. Grinding into his tongue, she clutched his thighs and groaned as the endless throbs went through her.

Shaking and wet, she climbed off him, barely able to totter away on her high heels. Dizzily, she met Tristan's eyes and smiled.

He scowled. Apparently tonight wasn't going exactly as he hoped.

"Hey," Hunter said. He struggled to sit up. "I, uh, we're not finished here." He gestured to his hard cock.

She shrugged and drank a bottle of water. "Sorry, Hunter, I'm all tuckered out."

“What?” Outraged crossed his handsome face. “Alexandra, I’m ready to blow here!” Diego cleared his throat. “Once again, there are other people in the room, you know.”

A look of comprehension dawned in Hunter’s eyes. “Uh, no. No way. I’m straight.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” Tristan burst out, crossing the room. “You weren’t so straight the night I made you come all over my stomach!”

Hunter glared at him. “I was just horny because of the customer! It had nothing to do with you touching me!”

“Bullshit.” Tristan grabbed Hunter’s cock and roughly began stroking him. “You loved it, you were moaning that it was the best handjob you’ve ever had in your life.”

“That was ... for the customer.” Hunter was breathing hoarsely. “I was faking it, for her.”

“You little liar. You loved it, just like you love it right now.” Tristan reached between his legs and began to fondle his balls.

The two rivals stared at each other, lust and hostility blazing together in their eyes. Alexandra held her breath as she waited for Hunter’s response. Defiance was written all over his rebellious face. Yet the tension of his muscular body, from the hunch of his shoulders to the stiffness of his legs, told of a very different urge. As Tristan stroked his cock, Hunter’s mouth fell open. His eyes fluttered shut and a low, desperate moan broke from his throat.

At that moment, Alexandra knew this would be the night of her dreams.

Diego’s arms encircled her. She sighed and arched back into him as they watched the show unfolding before them. Diego ran one finger across her clit with tantalizing slowness, his touch igniting a new fire within her.

Hunter sagged back on the sofa and flung his legs open, all resistance gone. “Suck me,” he said, his voice trembling.

Tristan knelt between Hunter’s legs and swallowed his shaft. Hunter groaned and caressed his hair, spreading his thighs wider as Tristan stroked just beneath his balls. Watching the two strippers together was even more erotic than Alexandra had imagined. As Tristan expertly slipped a finger into Hunter’s ass, making the pretty blond boy moan and writhe on the sofa, he sucked his cock with a swift rhythm that clearly was making Hunter go out of his mind.

Diego’s erection prodded her from behind, signifying that he also was enjoying the view. He stroked her throat and breasts, then kissed her ears. “All the dreams I’ve had of you, they never went quite like this,” he murmured.

She turned around and kissed him, feeling his cock through his pants. Being naked in his arms while he was still clothed was oddly exciting. “Mine neither.”

Diego caressed her hair, brushing his lips over hers in the way she’d imagined him doing so many times before. “Just remember that you’re my number one,” he whispered. “Don’t get me wrong, Lex, playing with them is fun, but my heart belongs to you.”

She stared up into his eyes. So many times she had admired his beauty on the sly—striding into Maxwell’s, or over sushi, or watching him flirt with a new conquest at a bar. Tonight, she could finally let all of the love and adoration she’d been hiding pour from her heart. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

She ran her fingernails through his hair, then brought them down his cheeks to trail across his beautifully full mouth. He kissed her back with forceful hunger. Alexandra

undid his pants, playing with his cock as they kissed until she could feel his balls growing tight with unspoken demand. She gripped the base of his shaft and moved her other hand over the head, stroking and squeezing him until he moaned in her mouth. Then Diego startled her by sweeping her up into his powerful arms and carrying her to drop her on top of the massive bed.

He was on top of her a moment later, flicking her nipples swiftly with his tongue. He pulled and twisted them until she moaned, then gently bit her ribs. She tossed restlessly beneath him, feverish for his touch yet hungry for something more. Impatiently she pulled off the rest of his clothes until he was entirely naked, all six feet four of him gorgeous and hard and ready for her.

She spread him out on the bed. He looked so perfectly masculine at that moment that she couldn't believe he was hers.

"Ride me," Diego growled.

Alexandra found a condom on the nightstand and sheathed him, then straddled his hips. Slowly, she positioned herself over the splendor of his rock-hard thighs and lowered herself onto his erection. Lightly balancing her hands on his chest, she sank down onto him, as if they were practiced lovers who had coupled a thousand times this way. Steadily, implacably, his cock rose up into her like a stalk, filling her until she almost screamed from sheer joy. Moaning, she bit her lip. That perfect white grin of his broke across his face, telling her he felt as ecstatic as she did. Alexandra began to move her hips on him, teasing and circling his cock. Rocking up and down and side to side, she rode him with a ceaseless, expert rhythm.

Over on the couch, Hunter came with a howl of gratification. A new current of desire ran through Alexandra as she watched Tristan take him in his arms. Then the electric energy between her and Diego grew so intense that she shut her eyes to eliminate all other sensation.

Two hands clasped her breasts from behind. She didn't know whose until Hunter's blond head lowered to suck her nipples into his mouth. She rode Diego as rapidly as she could, but Tristan was climbing onto the bed beside them and stroking the head of his own engorged head over Diego's mouth. Diego firmly grabbed his shaft and laved it with wide, long strokes of his tongue, until Alexandra felt as if she were going to explode.

Hunter kissed her mouth. "Let me fuck you now," he whispered. "Please..."

Damp with sweat, Alexandra nodded breathlessly. Hunter immediately lifted her off Diego's shaft and rolled her onto her back, sliding a condom on. Alexandra looked anxiously to the side but saw that Tristan had put his own condom on and forcefully rolled Diego to the side, facing Alexandra. Without a word, he mounted him from behind.

Hunter rubbed his cock against her clit, making her gasp. Hungrily, she reached for his shaft, but he lifted his hips away from her, laughing at her outraged face. "Remember the night we met? I offered you my cock, and you made me get off you."

"I'm sorry," she said desperately, twisting beneath him. "Please, Hunter."

"Please, Hunter, what?"

"Please fuck me." She had no shame as she lifted her legs up by her head and spread them as far as she could. "Please, I'm begging you."

"Hold her like that," Hunter ordered Diego.

Two strong hands gripped her ankles, holding them open by her head. Hunter took her hips in his hands and plunged inside her, barely giving her a chance to catch her

breath before stroking his cock in and out of her with long, deep strokes. Alexandra gasped again, feeling as if he had penetrated farther inside her than was possible. He thrust in and out of her with a ferocity that told her the depth of his longing. Yet something else wanted her attention: Diego's cock, nudging her lips. He was kneeling next to her as he held her ankles open, and groaning as Tristan thrust into him from behind.

White-hot excitement filled her skin. Both men fucked her mouth and pussy in rhythm while she writhed beneath them in helpless, euphoric abandon. A molten thrill was building inside her, and as Hunter drove all the way into her, it swelled to unbearable ecstasy. Alexandra twisted mindlessly on the bed, her pussy pulsing with joy, as a fireball of pure orgasmic bliss exploded through her.

Hunter groaned as her feminine muscles contracted around him. Gasping helplessly, he came a moment later and fell on top of her, kissing her stomach.

Dimly aware of Tristan's moaned climax, she pulled a pillow under her head. The four of them curled up on the bed, the dancing flames still beating on their damp skin.

"Lex." A finger traced a circle on her back.

She rolled over, aware she had drifted off. "Diego?"

He gently extricated her from the tangle of bodies. "Come outside with me."

"Outside? It's freezing out!"

He held up a blanket, then led her out onto their wooden deck. The surrounding pine trees were bright under the full moon. The sharp air felt almost good on her flushed skin.

"I thought we needed some alone time." He tossed the blanket on the deck and smiled at her, bare-chested in the frosty night.

As she sat down, she realized that he alone hadn't come from their wild four-way inside. His erection still pointed north, and his eyes were almost misty in the moonlight, glazed with sexual hunger. She could feel his need for her, smell it on his skin like heat, taste it in the electric charge of his lips.

He crouched next to her, his black hair outlined against the moon. She leaned up toward him, her mouth aching for a kiss, but instead Diego ran his hands up her thighs. Her cheeks flamed as his fingers danced between her legs, tickling her sex until she shifted in an appreciative moan on the ground. She didn't think she could come again tonight until he gently opened her thighs, exposing her sex to the brilliant winter moonlight.

"Open your legs," he whispered and stroked her wet slit with his fingers.

She nodded, closing her eyes from the unbearable sweetness of his thumb vibrating her clit as his knuckles gently pressed her wet pink opening. She spread her legs farther, aching to be filled.

But Diego surprised her again, suddenly pulling her up by the wrists and forcing her up onto her knees. She swallowed, an intense heat shaking between her legs.

"Diego, I—"

He fell back on the blanket and slid between her legs. Spreading her knees firmly apart, he brought her groin over his face. Gasping, she half-fell, half-leaned onto her hands as Diego positioned her sex on his mouth. Then slowly he began to kiss her pussy, moving his lips with exquisite skill on her aching clit.

Alexandra's body lit up with the fire of an ecstatic new sensation. Her other lovers had licked her repeatedly or thrust their tongues deep inside her. But Diego gently bit the

trembling damp skin of her groin, kissed the hooded rosebud of her clit, and used his lips to awaken her every burning nerve. His tongue ran over her like a snake, arousing a dizzying lust that swelled through her entire body like an inferno.

A long groan escaped her lips. Unable to stop herself, Alexandra wriggled on his face in an unconscious urging on of his tongue. He held her hips tightly, steadying her, before sliding his hands up to stroke her nipples. She moaned again, scarcely conscious of the chill on her naked skin.

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

In response, his tongue slid deep into her pussy, rotating in delirious circles until she began to cry out. Mindless with desire, she arched her back and straddled his face, wildly riding his tongue as white-hot tension filled her body. Smoothly, he slipped his fingers deep into her slickness, rubbing her G spot as his lips sucked the swollen bud of her clit. A storm of sensation filled her blood, and then she came like heat lightning, her screams electrifying the night.

Shuddering, she rocked forward on her hands, the tremors of her orgasm shaking her entire body. Only a low moan, a mixture of confusion and heat, escaped her. She couldn't speak. Wave after wave of searing bliss rolled through her skin as he continued to lick her.

Weak and shaking, she collapsed and rolled onto her side. A cool prickling euphoria was sweeping her skin, as if she were floating among the stars.

Diego rolled onto his side to face her. "Hey," he whispered, "We're not done yet."

Alexandra felt his erection press into the softness of her belly. Still breathing hard, she managed a smile, keeping her eyes closed so that the exquisite hardness of him was the only sensation filling her mind.

"I don't ever want to be done with you," she said when she could speak. She reached out for his face. His jaw, lightly stubbled, curved against her hand like a cat's.

In answer he sought her mouth with his, inviting her further with a soft, shy probe of his tongue. She kissed him back, experiencing the shape and softness of his lips as the gratification of a long-denied wish.

Diego leaned his hard-muscled length against her, the light hair of his legs deliciously abrasive on her smooth skin. He ripped into the condom wrapper and hesitated for just a moment, then ran another finger along her wet, swollen folds. A moment later, sheathed, he pushed deep into her core.

Alexandra sucked in her breath, overcome by his first thrusts. Sliding her leg over his waist, she held him tight. Diego gazed into her eyes, searching for confirmation of their shared sensation. She gave a barely perceptible nod and bit her lip, struggling to go slow.

Taking her in his hands, he began to move her hips up and down his shaft. Steadily, he stroked in and out of her pussy in a languid, seamless rhythm, spreading waves of oceanic bliss through her body. Closing her eyes, Alexandra surrendered to the expertise of his cock. The sound of his damp stomach slapping hers filled the night along with their cries and groans. She reveled in the timeless sounds, feeling transported back to some eternal night of another era. They could have been in any century under this same blue-tinged moon.

Alexandra slid her arms around his damp chest, feeling his heartbeat thud against hers. As she pressed her breasts against him, his cock began to move faster, rapidly

thrusting in and out of her tight, clinging heat. She moaned into his neck, feeling that tell-tale roar build between her legs. His cock seemed to grow even larger inside her, thrusting against her deepest, most sensitive spot. She looked up into his eyes, so fevered with lust, and knew he was close.

“Not like this,” she breathed. She leaned up on her elbow, intending to roll him on his back. It was always easier for her to come when she was on top. But Diego sat straight up instead with a crooked grin and pulled her onto his lap in one swift, easy move.

She laughed breathlessly, feeling a bit as if she were riding a pony. A chilly breeze danced across her nipples as she slid down onto him again.

“Come on, cowgirl,” Diego whispered and linked his hands behind her back.

Alexandra slid her legs hungrily around his waist, sealing his cock inside of her. With a deep groan, he drove up to where she was hottest and began to fuck her with abandon, bouncing her up and down on his lap until she thought she would lose her mind. Moaning, she recklessly rode him with all her might, her thighs gripping him tightly as his cock worked in and out of her. Her breasts bounced and swayed against his face, the rough stubble on his jaw scratching her nipples.

Diego tilted his head back, his black hair falling over his shoulders as he watched her face contort with pleasure. “You’re so beautiful...”

Her pussy felt drenched with fire and water. She bit her lip, knowing she would go insane if she didn’t come soon and, at the same time, wanting this moment to last for infinity. Then Diego began to fondle her clit, stroking her so perfectly that an explosion of lust and light detonated within her entire body. As she cried out, her pussy squeezed him in wave after wave of hot, dripping pleasure. Diego pulled her roughly against him, smothering a howl of pure need as his cock throbbed and exploded within her.

He fell back on the blanket with her still in his arms. Still trembling from the force of her orgasm, she buried her face in his chest. Suddenly, she was very aware that they were naked outdoors on a cold winter night.

Diego stroked her hair. “This is something I’ve wanted for a long time, Lex.”

She snuggled into him. “Me too. I just never thought—”

He wrapped the blanket around them both. “Never thought what?”

“That I’d be anything more than a momentary tumble to you. That... this could last.” She swallowed painfully.

He buried his face in her hair, inhaling deeply. “If I could have made my feelings for you go away, I would have done that a long time ago. But you got under my skin, and that was before I’d even touched you.”

She searched his eyes. “And where does Tristan fit in? This isn’t exactly a traditional love story we’re having here, Diego.”

He hugged her tightly. “No, but we’ll figure all that out later. I’m just telling you that what you and I have is special. That no matter what, you and I are going to last.”

He helped her up and led her inside. Tristan and Hunter had fallen asleep in the bed, curled up beneath a down comforter, but they didn’t join them. Instead they sat down by the fire. As Diego wrapped his arms around Alexandra, a deep, sensual contentment settled in her. Dreamily, they watched the flames flicker out as sleep overtook them.

Hunter was gone when they awoke the next day, leaving behind a note: *Giving lessons on the slopes. Thanks for inviting me on your date.* After quick separate showers,

the three of them dressed and went down to the restaurant for pancakes.

“Well,” Tristan said happily as they wandered out to the snowy hills, “we still have a few more hours left of our official date. Anything else you guys want to try? Lex, do you want to go shopping?”

Alexandra noted with amusement how jubilant and relaxed he seemed today. Clearly his encounter with Hunter had satisfied a specific need in him last night. She was curious how their relationship at Heartbreakers would proceed in the future, but she figured that was their business.

“Nah,” she said. “The only thing I really want to do is take you on the Zip Trek. It’s like flying, Tristan. You have to try it.”

“No doubt,” Diego said. “Come on, one last flight and then we can go home.”

This time Alexandra let them go first, reveling in their hollers and whoops of joy as they went flying down over the snowy forests. As she watched them go, she could only be glad she’d found the courage inside her to explore a relationship with two such dynamic men. Last year, she’d been bored and unhappy in a dead marriage but too frightened to ever strike out on her own. Never had she dreamed that this kind of adventure was in store for her.

“Your turn,” the resort guide said. “Don’t be scared. There’s nothing to it. Just let go and enjoy the ride.”

“Oh, I will,” she told him. “I’m not scared at all anymore.” Confidently, she settled into the harness. Then she was soaring through the air again, free as a bird, ready to fly straight into whatever the future might hold.

The End

About the Author:

Veronica Wilde is an erotic romance writer whose work has been published with Liquid Silver Books and Samhain Publishing. A copywriter by day, her true passion is writing fiction—particularly anything related to the paranormal. She currently resides in Arizona with her boyfriend and three cats.

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