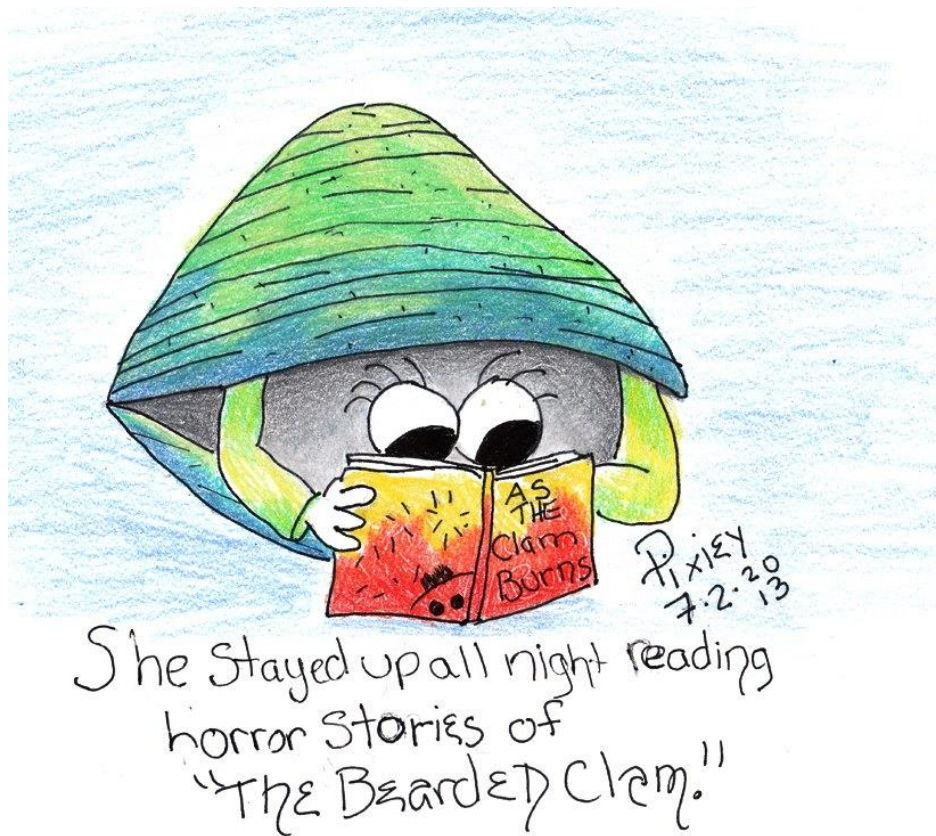


**Cocktail Hour Productions**

**presents**

**The 2013**

**Bearded Clam Challenge**



## Table of Contents

Introduction - [3](#)

Acknowledgements - [4](#)

Dedication - [5](#)

At the Club by Susan X. Meagher - [6](#)

Operation Bearded Clam by Jove Belle - [45](#)

Rebound by Norsebard - [72](#)

## Introduction

Contained in these pages are the submissions for the 2013 Bearded Clam Challenge. The rules are simple: write a story between 10,000 and 30,000 words that contains the phrases “cocktail hour” and “bearded clam”, have it edited and sent in by the deadline. No themes or genres are off limits and the contest is open to all writers.

Once Cocktail Hour receives them, the stories have all of the information identifying the authors removed and are sent to a team of judges. The judges don’t know who the others on the team are and the hosts of Cocktail Hour, Andy and Rev, have no discussions with the judges regarding the stories until after the judging sheets are collected and tallied. We all work very hard to put together as fair a contest as possible.

If you’re interested in entering the next Bearded Clam Challenge, get busy writing! For more information, contact us at [info@cocktailhour.us](mailto:info@cocktailhour.us).

Notice: All stories included in this compilation belong to the authors and are collected here for your enjoyment. Please respect their work and don’t repost or share without their permission.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the authors who took the time out of their busy schedules to use their creative juices to bring the Bearded Clam and Cocktail Hour to the page for all of us to enjoy. Also, a hellabig thanks to the judges who had the difficult task of deciding the order of the winners. To us, everyone who entered is a winner at Cocktail Hour and we hope you all enjoy this year's offerings.

We are looking forward to next year's challenge.

Andy & Rev

## Dedication

This compilation is dedicated to everyone who has offered their love and support to Cocktail Hour Productions. Cocktail Hour would be nothing without you.

# At The Club

Susan X Meagher

# At The Club by Susan X Meagher

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THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. NAMES, CHARACTERS, PLACES, AND INCIDENTS ARE THE PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION OR ARE USED FICTITIOUSLY. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS, EVENTS, OR LOCALES IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL.

THIS STORY, OR PARTS THEREOF, MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM WITHOUT PERMISSION.

“Chastity! You’re up! Get out there and shake some pearls outta them clams.”

Don’t roll your eyes. Do not roll your eyes. She’s been telling girls to pull pearls out of clams ever since the place opened. You’re not gonna be the one to convince her pearls come from oysters.

“I’m ready, Martha. I’ve just gotta find my other shoe.” I drop to my hands and knees and sort through the junk on the floor. Bags, backpacks, sneakers, G-strings, panties, bras...is that it? I yank on something big and kinda hard. A kid’s firetruck. Mistery’s gonna get her ass fired if she tries to stash her kid in here again.

Back to my knees. More underwear, a pint of vodka, fast food bags... Why there aren’t rats the size of beagles is anyone’s guess. But when you have ten strippers jammed into a space the size of a decent bathroom, and a cheap owner who won’t put in a locker or two, you’re gonna be up to your ears in trash. “Got it!” I jump up, jam my foot into the shoe and dash to the edge of the stage. The last notes of “Sweetie Pie” fade out, replaced by “Pour Me Some Sugar,” my song. I hate the damn song, but I didn’t know any better when I was new and the DJ chose it for me. Lesson learned. Never let anyone make decisions for you.

Vixen leaves the stage and slaps me on the ass as she passes. “Cheap fuckers tonight.”

I nod, but don’t pay much attention. Vixen’s about my age, but she’s got a lot of miles on her. A mean scowl is all she’s got for a smile, and tonight her hair looks like cotton candy after a kid’s taken a few bites out of it. Takes a certain kinda guy to toss his bucks at her. Like a guy who forgot his glasses.

I decide to change things up. You’ve got about five seconds to catch a guy’s attention, and since Vixen’s as hard as glass, I amp up the sweet girl thing. That’s my thing anyway, but I can lay it on thick when I have to.

Donny, tonight’s DJ, does my intro. “You know her. You love her. She’s your best friend’s little sister. The one you’ve always wanted to plow. Let’s give a big Bearded Clam welcome to Chaaaaaas...tity!”

I pause for a moment, almost letting myself think about how I wound up dancing in a club named for a woman’s hoo-ha. But thinking won’t shake a single buck out of anyone’s hand, so I rush the stage, as if someone’s pushing me out there against my will. For just a second, I look back at the curtain, like I might bolt. That makes the newcomers look up. They love to see a girl who looks like it’s her first time—for anything.

I let my gaze glide across the crowd, focusing on guys who don’t look like they wanna throw me in their trunk and bury me in a shallow grave. Yes, I’ve watched way too many true-crime shows, but I wouldn’t put it past half of these creeps.



Eye contact is where the money is. I try to connect with a few guys sitting at the bar, but nothing doing. Maybe Vixen was right. Sometimes there's nothing you can do to pry a buck out of a guy's hand. The music's pounding loud enough to make my ears buzz, but I concentrate on my act, and get into it.

I grab onto the pole like I've never seen one before, then twirl myself around, a kid on a playground. Yeah, right. A kid on a playground who's wearing clear, plastic, six inch platforms. Maybe I'm beginning to believe my own bullshit.

The Clam isn't a big club. We've got maybe thirty little tables, each just big enough to hold a few overpriced drinks. Tonight guys cluster around just six of them. Since no one at the bar has a pulse, I try to scare up some interest from them. It's tough to pull them in, 'cause they're farther away, but I've gotta get something shakin'. Besides my ass. I spot a couple of prospects, young, brothers maybe, and one of them looks me right in the eye. Finally! I do a quick assessment. Sandstone bib overalls, big, hooded thermal jackets and baseball caps from fishing companies. Probably just back from ice fishing. At least three shirts peek out from the smaller guy's bibs, but I bet he still froze his butt off out there. You couldn't pay me enough to fish in January.

I launch into my dance, keeping it very innocent. It's a little hot at the playground today. I'd better whip my tiny, white, see-through dress off. That's better. Now I can play on this nice pole in my undies.

Years of legit dance training have paid off. I can climb this thing like a monkey. Upside down, I take a peek, seeing the smaller of the two guys staring at me—slack-jawed—like he's never seen a woman work a pole. Maybe he's a virgin. That'd be nice for a change. Most of the guys who come in here have been to every titty bar in New England. They're bored to death, showing about as much interest as they would if they were waiting to get their oil changed. It's a charge to have a guy actually see you.

I pull myself upright, then whip around the pole once again, holding on with just my knees. Now I ditch my bra and hope no one notices how much it pushed me up. You don't have to have big tits to make a living, but it sure doesn't hurt. I'm the only natural on duty tonight. That's nice, 'cause the guys who like real tits seek me out. But if a guy isn't really into naturals, those big casabas are hard to resist.

I fly around the pole, holding on with one hand and one ankle, then hump it a few times. You can start out sweet and innocent, but if you don't get nasty pretty quick you lose 'em. Once more I flip upside down, then let one leg drop. I hold on for dear life, glad we havta keep our G-strings on. It doesn't cover much, but if I didn't have it these guys would see all the way up my coochie. I finish by gliding gracefully into a split. Now that the fixed lights aren't right in my eyes, I can see a few balled up singles littering the floor. That won't even pay for gas. I saunter over to the gynecology rail, giving the guys at the bar a last chance to check me out. I'm shaking my stuff like crazy, trying to pry a few bucks out of these cheapskates. A couple of guys stick bills in the air and I run over to them to collect. Most of them are content to stick it in my garter. But one short-armed type holds it so low I have to bend over to even see it. He wants to put it in my mouth. I'd walk home before I'd let a guy stick a dirty single in my mouth. I

turn to leave when I see the smaller fisherman, standing right in front of the stage, holding out what looks like a twenty.

Innocent little lamb! Should I tell him nobody drops twenty for a normal rotation dance? Sure. Then I'll give him a pint of my blood. I slide over to him and wait for him to stick the bill somewhere. But he just stands there, holding it out. As I reach down to take it, I feel his hand. Rough, callused, chapped, strong. Just like my grand-dad's. You can always tell a fisherman's hands.

"Thanks. I really appreciate that." I hold the eye contact for as long as possible. That ain't long. Yasmin's song has started and she'll kick me right in the butt if I take away a second of her stage time.

"You're welcome."

A guy who looks you in the eye and has manners? If I was into guys, he'd be my type. Even in the dim light I can pick out a square jaw, nice mouth, clear eyes, dark hair long enough that he has to tuck it behind his ears. I give him a little wave. "See you later?"

He doesn't look like he knows what I'm talking about. Definitely a virgin. Gonna have to school him on how the nice girls will actually rub against your boner for a twenty. I scamper off stage, ignoring the curses Yasmin hurls at me as I slip past her. Temper, temper!

I put a bra on, pull another gauzy dress from my bag, change my shoes, and fluff my hair. Natasha walks over and pulls on a lock. "What color is this?"

"Uhm...blonde?" I'm not sure where she's from, but her English comes and goes.

"What blonde?"

I look at her in the mirror, not sure if she doesn't know the word or has a question I'm not answering. "It's what I was born with. Darker in the winter, lighter in the summer."

Her gaze turns puzzled, then she scowls. "More blonde is good. Dye it. You make more."

She's right. I could definitely be making more. But I still have a soul, and am determined to keep it. Not that there's anything wrong with dying your hair. But if you do it just to land a few more singles, you're taking the first step to letting this place control your life. No thanks.

I stand and check myself in the mirror. Thank god the place is so dim. Getting three or four hours of sleep is definitely catching up to me. Hard to play the sweet young thing with bags under your eyes.

As I hit the floor a guy waves a twenty in my face. Not my kinda guy—at all. But a twenty is a twenty. I'm not here for my health.

Putting a hand on his shoulder, I lean close and whisper over the din, "What can I do for you, sugar?"

“Siddown.” He kicks a chair with his foot. Ooo, a real Prince Charming.

I sit and wait for him to tell me what he wants. Maybe he’d like to hand over some cash because I remind him of his mother.

“What’s your name?”

“Chastity. I haven’t seen you here before. First time?”

Ignoring my question, he says, “Your real name.”

Like I’d tell! But it doesn’t pay to make them mad. “Don’t tell anyone,” I whisper, “it’s Britney.” Half of the girls in my grade were named Britney. Just not me.

“How long you been stripping?”

No need to lie about this one. “Six months. College tuition’s awful high.”

He sneers at me. Like I’m not just lying, but too stupid to notice he’s openly making fun of me. “Every stripper’s gonna be a nurse. The hospitals will be full of ’em. A bunch of big titted girls stumbling around on white stripper shoes.”

We were gonna keep this short and sweet. The shorter, the sweeter. “I’ve only finished one year, but I’m definitely not gonna be a nurse.” Also true. No sense in lying if you don’t need to.

“Wanna drink?”

Oh, super. I was hoping to give him a quick lap dance and split. But my ass will be thoroughly chewed if I refuse. Drinks are where the club makes the cash. “Sure. We’re not supposed to do shots, but I’d love a Jager.” Guys love it if they think you’re breaking a rule. It doesn’t even matter what rule it is. I’m not getting a real drink, of course. If I had a real drink every time a guy bought me one, I’d wind up in a ditch—or jail. Luckily, the bartender’s an expert in faking it. He knows I like a shot glass mostly filled with water, with just a splash of Jager on top.

“Hey!” he shouts at Angelique, the cocktail girl. “A Jager for Britney and a draft for me.” Can’t keep a secret to save his life! What part of “don’t tell anyone” did Bluto miss?

“I don’t know your name,” I say, trying to act interested.

“Jerry.” He leans closer. “You do any OTC?”

I shake my head so fast I get a little dizzy. “No, we can’t do anything outside the club. They’re really strict.” And even if that wasn’t true, I wouldn’t start with you. I really don’t wanna see the inside of your trunk.

With a bitter laugh, he twitches his head towards a pink-headed mop a couple of tables over. “Vixen blows me for forty. Right in my truck. Not ten feet from the door.”

“Wow.” I try to look both shocked and amazed. “She’s braver than I am. I really need this job. I can’t take that kinda risk.”

Our drinks are delivered and I throw it back—before he notices the tiny bit of alcohol floating on the water. “Delicious. Thanks.” I lean in again. “Want a dance?”

“I want a blow job. Why should I pay for blue balls?”

Good question. I wouldn’t pay a woman to tease me. But that’s the point of strip clubs, genius. “Then I’ve gotta move along. Thanks for the drink, Jerry. You seem like a fantastic guy.” If he believes that... As I stand, he shoves his hand under my dress, trying to grab a handful of my butt. It didn’t take long to perfect how to dance away from jerks like Jerry. The bouncers will toss a guy if he goes way over the line, but that line’s not far enough for me. I learned how to break a guy’s nose just to be safe. I haven’t had to do it, but they’d better not test me. Butt out of range, I bend over and smile into his big, mean mug. “Maybe next time, handsome.” What a super way to waste five minutes for no money.

I look around and see that the brothers are still here. But Kiki is grinding on the bigger one. Lost my chance. I’ve gotta get some dances in or I’m gonna be in the hole for the night. As I pass, the music stops and Kiki slides off. When she totters away, I swoop in. “What brings you guys out tonight?”

The bigger one answers, smiling up at me. He looks a little wasted. “My birthday.”

“Cool! Twenty-five, right?”

“Nope. You’re off.” Even a few words gives him away as a Mainer. I was kinda hoping they were here on vacation. Travelers are a little looser with their dough.

“Why don’t you guys buy me a drink and we can chat?”

“I will,” the smaller one says. He’s even cuter up close. The darkness of the club can hide a lot of sins, but I can tell he’s the real deal. Really nice eyes, blue and clear. Kind of a baby face; smooth cheeks, but strong features. Nice shoulders, kinda rangy. Looks like the strong, silent type. He signals the waitress, then says to his brother, “You want another?”

“Hell, yeah. It’s my birthday.”

“What would you like?” he asks me.

“Vodka and OJ.” I can always use a little vitamin C. The bartender has a bottle of vodka that he uses for those of us who don’t want to drink. Pure water.

Angelique sidles over. “What’ll it be?”

“Do you have any Allagash?”

“A what?”

“Local beer?”

“It’s all local.” She points to the bar. “It’s right there.”

This guy is truly a gentleman. He doesn’t even laugh. “A draft beer and a vodka and OJ, please.” As she walks away, he shrugs. “I tried, bro.”

He has a nice voice. Smooth and warm.

“Nothing for you?” I ask. Having to push drinks is my least favorite part of the job. A lot of these guys have driven—far—to get here. Who wants to be responsible for one of them killing someone?

“No, I’m sticking with soda. We’ve got a long drive home.”

“Good for you.” I lean close while pressing my arms against my sides, trying to get him to take a look at my modest rack. “I’m Chastity. What are your names?”

“I’m PJ, and this is Jake. It’s his twenty-sixth, by the way.”

“Good to meet you. I can tell you’re related.”

Is that a blush? In a strip club? That’s a first!

“Yeah, I guess we do look alike.”

“Is Jake the big brother?”

“Nope. Younger. Two years.”

Strong and silent, just like I thought. I wait, expecting the usual questions. What’s your real name? How long have you been stripping? Do you like it? How old are you? How tall are you? Do you have a boyfriend? Etcetera, etcetera. But these two just sit there, looking at me. Happy grins on both of their handsome faces.

“Where are you from, guys?”

Jake fields that one. “Here, originally. Portland now.”

“So you’re in Bangor for a visit?”

“On our way home for Sunday with the family. How about you? Are you from here?”

“Not too far.” Lie. Big lie. “I bet you’re fishermen.”

“Lobstermen,” Jake corrects me. “Got our own boat.”

Our drinks are delivered and I watch PJ take out his wallet to pay. No, no, no! Never let a stripper see how much money you have. I feel like I should give the poor guy some pro tips, but first I’d like to separate him from some of that cash. He’s got a few hundred on him that he must be planning on spending. I’m here to help.

“You guys don’t fish at this time of year, do you?”

Both nod their heads, almost solemnly, then Jake says, “Hard shell lobster most of the year, shedders in July or August.”

“My grand-dad fished. Not for a living, though.”

“Where’d he fish?” Jake asks.

“Just about anywhere. He was a heck of a fly fisher. He’d head all the way over to the Rapid River for wild brook trout every chance he got. But he loved ice fishing on lakes near us too. I’ve eaten enough fish for three lifetimes.”

“Bet you haven’t eaten too much lobster,” PJ says, his eyes twinkling. “It’s easy to get sick of stripers and trout. Not lobster.”

I take a sip of my drink. “You know, you’re right. I’ve never, ever been sick of lobster.” Weird. Talking to these two is like having a regular conversation. Neither of them is staring at me like I’m just a pair tits. “Would either of you like a dance?”

“Uhm...okay.” Jake doesn’t look uninterested. I’m sure of that. More like he’s embarrassed. Like I just reminded him that I’m a stripper. I take a quick look around. There are only nine guys sitting at tables, all of them regulars, none of them particularly generous. Why am I in such a rush?

“No hurry. We can just talk for a while. It’s not very busy tonight.”

“It’s the weather,” Jake decides. “Supposed to snow.”

“Oh, great. Just what we need.” I live a long way from Bangor, an hour and a half due north, right next to a big state park. After a storm the snowmobiles rip through the place from sunup to sunset, ruining my precious sleep. Spring can’t come fast enough for me. ATVs are somehow quieter.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” PJ fidgets a little in his seat. “I’ve never been to a club before, and I don’t know how things work. How do you get paid?”

Hmm...what is he really asking? I shouldn’t be so suspicious, but I’ve been burned too many times to count. But I can’t figure out how telling the truth will hurt me, so I spill it. “It depends on the club. Some have a house fee. Forty or fifty bucks just to let you work.”

“Wait.” His eyes got big. “You have to pay them?”

“Yep. No house fees here, so you don’t start out in the hole every night.”

“How can they get away with that?” He actually looks outraged.

I shrug. “Lots of demand. Everyone wants to dance at the biggest club in the area. All of the Portland clubs have house fees.”

“But you like this place better?”

“Uh-huh. It’s more intimate.” If by intimate you mean rat-hole. But I’m not gonna tell him I work here ’cause Portland’s too damn far. There’s an equally skanky place close to the snowmobile park, but I’ve got enough things to worry about without guys from my town coming in.

“You get to keep your tips, right?”

“Oh, sure. And my dance money. I tip out the staff with ten percent at the end of the night, and keep the rest.”

He blinks a few times. “That’s it? No salary?”

“Salary?” I have to laugh at that. “We’re independent contractors. We only get paid when we make our customers happy.”

Immediately, he turns to his brother. “Take a dance. Go on. I’ll pay.”

Jake gives me a slow smile. “You wanna?”

“That’s why I’m here, guys.”

I get up and sit astride Jake’s lap. He’s a big guy. Probably six four. Close to two hundred pounds. Muscular as hell. He’s definitely a little smashed, but not sloppy drunk. The music starts and I do something I only do to nice guys. “How do you like it?” I ask, leaning close to his ear. I start to move my hips gently, feeling his muscular thighs.

“Waddya mean?”

“Mmm, some guys like me to really work ’em over.”

“Whatever you’re doing is great.” His eyes are just a little glassy.

I decide to give old Jake a show. We’re a “no touch” bar, so we have to make the guys happy without letting them paw us. Not as easy as it looks. Most girls stick a knee into a guy’s crotch and rub against him until he begs for mercy. I do that, too, but not if I even vaguely like the guy. Then I go the other way. I try to turn them on by looking like I’m having fun. Almost like I’m alone, entertaining myself.

I stick both arms in the air and push my tits as close to Jake's face as I can without touching him. Then I use every kinda move I've ever learned. Rocking on his lap while moving everything slow and easy seems to work really well for the big guy. Just in case he's an ass-man, I stand and put my hands on the edge of his chair, then bend and press the back of my neck against the seat. Up on my toes, then...ta-da!...I flip over and shake my butt right in his face. I can't see him, but I hear a gut-groan that shows he digs it.

I can't help but steal a look at PJ. If my guess is right, he's about to come in his pants. Score! I hope the brothers aren't the jealous types, because I'm gonna tag-team them until PJ's wallet is as empty as his mind appears at the moment.

I curl my body and drop my feet to the floor. Then back onto Jake's lap to thrust my hips a few times. "Feels so good," he murmurs, eyes closed.

Such a cutie! Closing your eyes during a lap dance is a waste of twenty bucks! I move closer, letting him smell me. His nose twitches when I pull away. I could take off my bra, but I like to wait until the guy asks me to. I'm not sure if Jake is just shy, or he doesn't know to ask. But that's cool. I like to leave something on the table to make them wanna come back. The song is almost finished, so I give him the money shot. Sliding onto one leg, I press my knee into his crotch—gently—and nudge him a little. It must kinda suck to have your dick tell the whole world you're turned on. His hand rises and hovers near my shoulder. "Can't touch, baby," I whisper.

Immediately, he sticks it into his armpit. A real gentleman! He's not the first, but I can count the ones I've danced for on one hand. The big, bass line pulses a few times, and the dance is done. Jake has a few beads of sweat gathering at his hairline. Given how his overalls are straining, I'd give myself an "A" for that one.

"Another one," PJ says, almost panting. Damn, if he's that hot watching, he's gonna explode when he gets one of his own.

"Not for you?" I turn to catch his eye, still astride his brother's lap.

"No, it's his birthday."

"Take a dance," Jake urges. "You'll love it."

"I'm good. Give him another."

I look down at Jake, who smiles serenely up at me.

"Let's do it."

Four dances later, Jake's head's thrown back, his mouth open. "I'm gonna die," he whimpers.



“You’re gonna die in the morning,” PJ says. “Pop’s gonna be banging on your door at six.”

“You guys have to work tomorrow?”

“Nope. Ice fishing.” PJ stands. He’s shorter than his brother, maybe five eleven. Much thinner, too. More my type. If he had a vagina. “We’ve gotta get going.” He’s been paying me by the dance, and I have his five twenties tucked into my G-string. Now he slips a bunch of folded bills into my hand. I can’t remember the last time a guy didn’t want to put the money on me somewhere. Even in a “no-touch” club you’ve gotta give them a little satisfaction for a twenty. “I think Jake’s gonna remember this birthday for a long time. Thanks.”

“Really? You’ve gotta leave?”

“’Fraid so. If I don’t get him outta here, he’s gonna embarrass himself. And me.” Once again, a slight blush climbs up his cheeks. “It was really nice to meet you.”

I lean close to give him a quick kiss. I head for his cheek, but he shyly dips his head and it lands on the side of his cap. He smells a little like my grand-dad used to. Must be the hat. There’s probably a lot of salt spray on that thing. “It was nice to meet you too. Come back again.”

“Yeah. We will. Uhm...when do you work?”

“Every Friday and Saturday. And a few weekdays whenever I can manage. It really depends.”

“Can we call to see if you’re here?”

“Sure. But if I’m not, they’ll lie and tell you I am. Just come on the weekend. I’m always here then.”

Jake looks like he’s coming in for a hug. Instead, I kiss his cheek. “Bye-bye, Jake,” I murmur into his ear. “I hope you had a very happy birthday.”

“Epic,” he says, nodding vacantly as PJ leads him out the door.

I take a quick look at the bills PJ snuck into my hand. Five twenties. A one hundred percent tip. Damn, those were a couple of awesome lobstermen.

\*\*\*

Hours later, I stand by the door, waiting for one of the bouncers to walk me to my car. We’re not allowed to park close—good spots are for customers. But I’m not about to walk down near the woods by myself and have someone waiting for me. I’ve seen that show on True Crime TV. Finally, one of the big lunks walks me close and stands at the top of the rise to watch me start to slide down the icy drive. I guess he’ll hear me if I scream.

You have to be a fool to drive through a snowstorm at 4:00 am. Guilty as charged. But I have to get home. I thank whatever power's responsible for my truck starting right up. I've got a hundred and twenty thousand miles on her, and she'd better not go lame on me this year. I've got plans for every dollar.

I toss her into first and slowly climb up the drive. Made it. I've taken this trip enough times that I can do it without thinking. My mind idly goes over the night. I got there at noon, to catch the crowd that comes in for free lunch on Saturday. Left at four. Sixteen hours for four hundred and thirteen bucks. Not a bad night. But I would've been screwed if not for my lobstermen. I hope they have more brothers and each one of them has two or three birthdays.

I crack the window for a little fresh, cold air. I'm taking a biology class that's kicking my ass. I found this CD that explains things better than our crappy professor. I've got a good hour and a half to try to learn something while fighting to stay awake. Good times.

\*\*\*

Five thirty-five. That doesn't leave much time to get ready. I race into the house, then turn the shower on before I strip. No matter how little perfume I wear, I still smell like a cheap whore when I leave the club. There's so much scent in the air it's like being crop-dusted.

It would be so sweet to stay in the shower and let the hot water soothe my muscles. They ache like I've got the flu. But I'll be out on my ass if I'm late. No man waits for his bacon and eggs. After throwing on a fresh pair of jeans, a long-sleeved wool crew-neck and a chamois shirt I'm back in the truck, heading for Norma's.

The windows are filled with the fog of hot coffee and hash browns frying up. Norma opens the door when I tap on the glass. "Good morning sunshine!"

"Morning, Norma. Ready to sling some hash?"

She chuckles. "I don't know how you do it. I've never had a girl who looks more alert than you at six in the morning." She runs her thumb over the bluish marks under my eyes. "You getting enough sleep?"

"Oh, sure. I'd love a quick cup of coffee before the crowds. Do I have time?"

She looks at her watch. "You've got three minutes. The old farts are all in their trucks, just waiting for me to unlock that door."

"That's plenty." I prefer Coke, but coffee warms me up. I grab a cup and put enough milk in it to be able to slug it down without burning my throat. "I'm good to go. Let 'em in."

\*\*\*

Late Wednesday afternoon and I'm heading to the club. Winter has now lasted at least two years. It's early February and the damn temperature just keeps dropping. Shivering despite my down coat, hat and mittens, I scramble up the hill from the parking area. The little bit of sun we'd had is sinking fast, making the temperature edge down a few more degrees. "Gonna be a tough night," Martha says when I pop in the rear entrance. "You're probably wastin' your time."

"But it's Wednesday. Bearded Clamato Cocktail Hour! Everybody loves that!"

"Yeah, yeah, everybody loves 'em. But it's colder than a well-digger's ass and the place is damn near empty."

Martha's one of the few people who knows about my schedule. Or about how far out I live, for that matter. She's a good housemother. Not the brightest light in the harbor, but I don't think she'd screw me over intentionally. Given the stories I've heard, that's about all you can hope for.

Sadly, once I get out onto the floor, it looks like Martha's right. The night sucks big time. What was I thinking, coming in on a Wednesday when it's this cold? The only good thing is we've got a lotta no-shows, so I get plenty of stage time. Donny plays three in a row for me, and I do all right with tips. I also can now hardly lift my arms. Ten straight minutes on the poll feels like doing a hundred pull-ups.

After going backstage to change, I stroll around the room. Small crowd. Very small. Thank god there aren't many girls. We'd be fighting over the poor guys unlucky enough to have come out tonight. Back and forth we go, from the stage to the floor. Then I hit it big. Two guys come in and gravitate to me. They have money and after I give each a lap dance I can see they're somehow competing. I'm not sure if they're trying to impress me or each other, but I go back and forth on their laps for six songs, finally wobbling away with shaking thighs and a hundred and seventy bucks. That made the drive worth it.

We close at one during the week, and I'm ready to wrap it up. I'd danced for everyone who seemed even vaguely interested. But just after midnight, my favorite lobsterman shows up! We make eye contact immediately, and I zoom over to keep the other girls away. "PJ," I say warmly. I'm genuinely glad to see him. I'm also hoping he has a wallet full of twenties he wants to drop into my hot little hands.

"Hi. Uhm...I didn't think you'd remember me. It's been like a month."

"No way I'd forget you or Jake. Want a drink?"

"Sure. If I have to." He shrugs, looking a little tentative. "I'd rather give you my money, but if I have to have a drink, I will."

"There's no minimum. If you're good, I'm good." I wait until he sits down. "Dance?"

"Uhm...could I just...pay you to sit here and hang out?"

“Sure. No problem. They like me to keep moving, but I think it’ll be okay.” I look over my shoulder, towards the Champagne rooms. “If you want my full attention we’re supposed to go to a private room.”

“We can do that if you want. Like I said before, I don’t know the rules.”

I wave a hand at him. “Nah. Let’s stay. They charge twenty-five just to go in, then they’ll put the hard sell on you to buy champagne.” I shoo the cocktail waitress away, drawing a dirty look. I’m sure she’ll report me to the principal. “Jake couldn’t make it?”

“Nah. He’s working. I’ve been in Bangor a couple days. Just heading back to Portland now. Thought I’d take a chance that you’d be here.”

Oh-oh. PJ might be looking for the girlfriend experience. Touchy situation. You have to make guys like you enough to want to spend time with you, but you also have to know where to draw the line. It has to be drawn. PJ’s a doll, but I’m not his girlfriend. “I wasn’t sure I was gonna work because of the cold, but I’m glad I did.”

“Me too.” He takes out a twenty and puts it in front of me. “Is it okay if I pay for a dance but don’t take it?”

I laugh at the way he says that. “Sure. But I’m happy to dance for you. Jake liked his dances, didn’t he?”

“Uhm...yeah. I’d say that he did.” He shrugs, looking embarrassed. “I think he was hurting when we left. He winced at every bump in the road.”

“I hope I didn’t scare him off.”

He chuckles. “He talked about you for a solid week. He’d be with me if he wasn’t working.”

“I like to dance, but it’s nice to just talk too.” I reach over and put my hand on his. He blinks, then flips my hand over to look at it in the dim light.

His fingers glide over the calluses I’ve built up hoisting myself into the air with just my hands. My mitts aren’t chapped and raw like his, but I could compete in the callus contest. “Pole dancing is tougher than it looks.”

“Gosh, it really must be.”

Who says “gosh?” Cute Maine lobstermen, obviously.

The song ends, and PJ takes out another twenty. For some insane reason, I put my hand on his again, pushing the money away. “You’ll go broke paying me twenty bucks every three minutes. Sure you don’t want a dance? Then you’ll at least get something for your money.”

“I don’t think so.” He looks around, like he’s annoyed other people are there. “Maybe next time we could go to that private room. My birthday’s coming up. I’ll have Jake be my designated driver.”

“That’d be cool!” I’m actually excited about the prospect.

He checks his watch, even though I’m fairly sure it’s too dark to see the face. “I should get going. I just wanted to stop in for a few minutes.”

“I think it’s almost closing time. Why don’t you hang out? No charge.”

“No, that’s not right. This is your job.” He presses that second twenty into my hand. “I’ll see you in a month or so.”

I pat his back as I walk him to the door. Strange behavior on my part. I hadn’t ever walked a guy to the door. What are we...on a date? “See you,” I say as he walks out.

Immediately, Jocko descends from the elevated booth where he watches everything. He grasps my upper arm hard enough to leave a mark and hauls me over to the corner. “What’s with sitting at a table with your prom date? Sell drinks, honey. Drinks. We’re not here to hold hands and make goo-goo eyes at each other. Capiche?”

I have no idea what that word means, but I nod anyway. Jocko doesn’t like to explain himself. “I’ll push the drinks. Sorry.”

He turns and walks away, mumbling, “Sorry comes outta strippers’ mouths like water down the drain.”

Huh. I hope that makes sense to him, ’cause it doesn’t to me.

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Bruno, tonight’s designated parking lot escort, actually walks with me until I can clearly see my truck. Out of the corner of my eye I notice a guy—standing outside in the brutal cold. “Keep an eye on that one,” I say, tensing up.

A hand goes up, then a voice calls out, “Hey! Do you know if there’s a twenty-four hour garage around here?”

“PJ?” He starts to jog across the paved part of the parking lot. Even though it’s a dark night, I can see his cheeks are the color of apples. “You’re gonna freeze!”

“Truck won’t start. My feet got numb sitting in it. Thought it’d be better to keep moving.”

“There’s nothing around here,” Bruno says. “You can come in and get warm, but after the cleanup crew’s done, you’ll have to split.”

“There’s an all-night diner just before you get to I-95,” I say. “You could hang out there until Jake comes to get you.”

He holds up his phone. “He must have it turned off.”

“Your parents?”

He winces, visibly. “They’d come, but I really hate to call. They have to get up really early.”

“How far do they live from here?”

“Not very. About a half hour. Towards Portland.”

Exactly the opposite direction of my house. My good nature will be the death of me. “Hop in. I’ll give you a ride.”

Bruno puts his big, beefy hand on my arm. “Not a good idea.”

“It’s fine. PJ’s legit.”

Without being asked, PJ whips out his wallet, extracts his license and shows it to Bruno. “Write down my name and license number.”

Bruno looks at it, chuckles, then hands it back. “You’re fine.”

PJ looks at me like he’s ready to give me a kidney. “Are you sure you’ve got time to do this? Are you going in my direction? I don’t want to put you out...”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Bruno takes off for the warmth of the club, while we get into my truck. PJ gives me simple directions to get to his parents’ house. We shiver until the heater starts to blow warm air on us. “Why do we live here?” I ask. “God knows there are strip clubs in Florida.”

He smiles, looking boyish. “But no lobster.”

“Good point.” I wrench the old girl into first and start to climb the hill. “It’s kinda nice to have company. It’s always a struggle to stay awake.”

“You work hard. About like I do. But I don’t have to smile and act like I like the lobsters. They just walk right into the trap.”

That’s the cutest thing to say! “Yeah, it’d be easier if I could set traps and go check ’em the next day. Just pull the twenties out and go home. I wouldn’t have to wear those stupid shoes, either.”

He smiles, a cute, impish look to him. “No, but you’d still get calluses from opening the traps.”

I reach over to pat his arm. He has on so many layers I'm not sure he's even inside. "What will Jake do when you're not at work in the morning?"

"Oh, I'll be there. I'll borrow my mom's car."

"Jake can't go out alone?"

"He could, but you've gotta go much farther out in the winter. Gets lonely. And dangerous. He hired a helper when I was gone, but he'll be stuck if I don't show."

"How many traps do you have?"

"Six hundred, give or take. We can go to eight, but traps are expensive."

"Six hundred! For just the two of you?"

"Uh-huh. We don't put 'em all out in the winter. We'd have to go so far out that it'd be dark before we checked 'em. It's much easier in the summer. Fourteen hours of daylight makes a big difference."

"You have to check 'em every day?"

"'Cept Sunday."

"I think stripping's easier." I shoot him a look to show I'm teasing.

"I don't think I'd be good at it. I know I couldn't walk in those shoes."

"Oh, you can get used to anything. When I first started pole dancing I slipped off so many times my grand-mom threatened to make me wear a helmet."

"That must've been a long time ago, 'cause you know exactly what you're doing now."

"Not that long." I think for a minute. "I guess I started pole dancing when I was a freshman in high school."

"You did?" Even with the bill of his hat pulled down I can see his eyebrows hike up. "I thought you had to be eighteen."

I laugh. "Not stripping. Just dancing. Pole dancing is popular just for exercise."

"How'd you get into your...your line of work?"

Hmm...tell the truth? Oh, why the heck not. He wasn't going to run to Moose Knuckle and tell the whole town. "It's not really my line of work." Laughing wryly, I add, "Most girls say that, but I mean it. I've got massive bills to pay, and once they're paid, I'm out."

"Credit cards?"

“No way. I’d go bankrupt before I’d strip to pay credit cards.” He’s looking at me like I’m saying the most interesting things he’s ever heard. Funny how a little genuine interest makes you keep talking. “My mom has...problems. She screwed my grand-mom out of some serious cash, then took off. That really made things rough for Grand-mom. She was on the hook for a ton of dough.”

He gives me such a sweet smile. Like he admires me. “And you took this job to help pay off her debts?”

“No way. I love my grand-mom, but I’d let her credit score go to zero before I’d strip. It took a lot to get me on the pole.”

He keeps staring at me, his gaze so intense it burns. “What was it?”

I turn and give him a smile, just trying to lighten the mood. “We were doing okay when we were both working a few jobs. We’d take any little bit of work; cleaning houses, watching over people just out of the hospital, babysitting, running errands, walking dogs. It was hard, but we were chinking away at the bills. Then, last May, Grand-mom slipped on an icy stair during that late snow we had, broke a hip and destroyed the other knee.”

“Oh, damn. That’s...horrible.”

“Isn’t it? She’s in good shape, but having her right hip and left knee out of commission meant she needed help all day long. I had to get her into a rehab place. No insurance, of course, so I had to come up with plan ‘B.’”

“Social Security doesn’t cover that?”

“Dunno. She’s only sixty-one, so she doesn’t qualify anyway. She’s home now, doing well, but I’m still paying off the bills.”

“You could declare bankruptcy,” he says quietly.

“I’ve thought of that. A thousand times. It’d be one thing if it was just my mom’s debts. But these are my bills. I begged those people to take her without insurance. There’s no way I’d walk away from that. It’s just not right.”

“You’re a good person. A really good person.”

“Just because I don’t trick people into giving me something I’m not gonna pay for? I’m a stripper, not a thief.”

“I didn’t mean...”

I smile to show that didn’t bother me. “By the time she’s back at work full-time, I’ll be able to quit. After that, my clothes will only come off for close, close friends.”



His voice is soft and very quiet. "I was hoping you liked what you did."

"Aww." I put my hand on his knee and give it a squeeze. "It's not so bad. I've been dancing my whole life, so that part of it's fine. I've had to toughen up a little, but I can usually convince myself I'm in a movie, or I think about the money instead of the guy giving it to me."

"I'm really sorry, Chastity. I wish there was a better way to get money."

"So do I. But I try to look at the bright side. If not for legal strip clubs, the only way a woman can make big coin fast is turning tricks. And trust me, that would leave scars."

That clearly put him over his limit for sad stories. "So...what'll you do when you quit? Did you go to college or anything?"

"Yeah. I'm in school now. Just a junior college, though. I'm not even sure why I'm going, but I guess it can't hurt to have a degree."

"You really don't know what you want to do?"

I think about that for a few seconds, then decide to be honest. "I'd love to dance or teach dance. But I live out in the middle of nowhere, so that's just a pipe dream. I was lucky to find my job at the local diner."

"What? You work at a diner too?"

"Yeah. Been there three years. Lucky to get it. There's more unicorns in my town than jobs."

"But that can't pay as much as..."

"No, it doesn't. But Grand-mom would strangle me if she knew I was stripping. I've gotta keep the local job so she doesn't suspect anything."

"Doesn't she wonder where you're getting the money from?"

"I told her I'm working double shifts at a twenty-four hour diner about a half hour from us. That lets me come home at 5:00 am and not have her get suspicious." I sigh, thinking about how brokenhearted she'd be if she thought I'm turning out like my mother.

"I wish it was easier for you. I really do."

He looks at me so sympathetically. So much feeling in those pretty eyes. Like he's about to give me his wallet, or his boat. "It's all right, PJ. I'll get through it."

"Is there anything I can do? Any way I can help?"

Oh, oh. Time to make things clear. I put my hand on his knee again, just a friendly touch. “I’m not looking for a boyfriend. I’m into women.”

He’s quiet for a second, and I brace myself. Most guys like the idea of women being with other women, but some of them get freaked out by it.

When PJ speaks again, his voice is soft, almost hesitant. “So am I.”

You never knew what was gonna come out of his mouth! I couldn’t tell if he was trying to be funny or just had a funny way of talking. “I kinda figured that. It’d be a waste of time to come to the club looking for guys.”

“Yeah, I guess.” His head tilts to one side, and those intense eyes stare at me for a long time, like he’s trying to get into my head. “You didn’t answer me. Is there any way I can help?”

“Just tell your nice friends to come to the club and throw money at me. That’s all I need right now.”

“I don’t have many friends in Portland. Haven’t had time to make any. But I know some guys in Bangor. I’ll see if I can talk them into going next time I’m in town.”

“If your friends are as nice as you are, I’ll be very happy to meet them.”

“You’ve gotta turn right at the intersection. US 202.”

I give him a smile. “You’re out where God lost his shoes, too.”

“Yeah. Pretty much. My parents hate to go into Bangor. Too much traffic. They still haven’t been to Portland to see our apartment.” He chuckles softly. “They say they’re too busy, but I think they’re afraid.”

“Do you like Portland?”

“Yeah, I like it all right. It’s nice to have places to go when you’re sick of your apartment...or your brother. But more than Portland, I love the ocean. I could live anyplace as long as the ocean was close.”

“I like it too. Not that I’ve been able to get out on it much.”

He gives me a smile filled with so much warmth it takes my breath away. “One Sunday, when it’s warm, we’ll go out on my boat. Poke around some islands. Have a picnic.” The corners of his mouth turn up, making him look happier than he did when he was staring at a mostly naked woman. “I guarantee you’ll love it.”

I let myself think about that for a minute. Spending the day with PJ would be fantastic. Not a doubt in my mind. What’s so damned attractive about this guy? I’ve never been into men. Their energy just doesn’t appeal to me. But PJ’s does. There’s something about him that makes me want to crawl onto his

lap and feel his arms close around me. And not for twenty bucks, either. For real. But I can't encourage him. That just wouldn't be right. When push came to shove, I couldn't go through with it. I'm too gay.

"When it's cold like this, it's hard to think of ever having a warm day. Now, where's my next turn? I've gotta concentrate to be able to get out of here."

"You could always stay over. Jake's room is ready and waiting for you."

I give him a quick look. "I'm gonna be pouring coffee in less than four hours." I don't add that two of those hours will be spent driving back home. "No sleep for me."

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Spring isn't here, but winter is finally loosening its death-grip. Now you don't risk frostbite by going out to get the mail without your gloves. Business is picking up too. Now it's common to have over a hundred guys in The Clam on a Friday or Saturday. My bills are getting smaller by the week. I'm only short about three thousand bucks. The second I clear that—I'm done!

More business means more girls, so my time in the rotation is limited. Three dances a night—max. That kinda sucks, because you get guys interested during your stage time. Chatting them up at tables is much harder, since most of them just stare at the stage, waiting for a girl to click for 'em. But we're all in the same boat. At least I'm only trying to pay bills. A lot of the girls have a kid or two or, worse, a drug problem. Your drug dealer never gets paid off.

It's early, only ten, but we're hustling. I'm cruising around, trying to get someone to pay attention to me, when PJ saunters in. He's such a cute guy. It puzzles me why so many guys play it all tough. Trying to show how full of themselves they are. Women love guys like PJ. Sweet, kind, thoughtful, and super cute. The kinda guy you could have a kid with, knowing he'd stick around.

I nearly sprint over to him. "Hey. Long time no see."

His smile is shy, as usual. "Yeah. We're still having to go way, way out with our traps. Most nights we don't finish 'til past dark." He holds his hands up. "Not much time for fun. But I'm headed to see my folks, and thought I'd stop by."

He'd gone a half hour out of his way, but I'm not gonna comment about that. "I'm glad you could make it. No Jake?"

He makes a face. "He's kinda got a new girlfriend and she's... She doesn't want him to..."

"Most women don't want their men to go to strip clubs."

"Yeah, I guess. So I'm solo until she figures out what a slob he is." He laughs a little. "At least I don't have to clean up after him when he stays at her apartment."

“Want a table? It’s crowded, but…” I look around, seeing nothing open. “You might have to squeeze in at the bar for a while.”

“That’s okay. Uhm… I could just come back another night. I feel kinda weird being here alone when it’s crowded like this.”

I grab his arm and tug him further into the room. “Don’t go. You make my whole night better.”

A dazzling smile lights his face up. “Really?”

“Really. Come on. Sit at the bar and I’ll grab a table for you as soon as one opens up.”

“Well…” He stares at the door for a moment. “Okay.”

I get him settled, then go back to work the tables. As I finish a dance, I nearly swallow my tongue. My cousin Jared, the only damn cousin on my mother’s side, is standing in the doorway, checking the place out. He’s right in the path I’d have to take to hide in the dressing room. My heart hammers in my chest like a pile driver. If he spies me, he’ll rat me out. Damn! There’s a strip club not ten minutes from his house! Why’d he have to come all this way to ruin my life?

There’s only one place to hide—the Champagne rooms. I run to where PJ’s sitting, duck down so his head blocks Jared’s view and say, “You’ve gotta come with me.” I sound like I’m about to pee my pants, and I’ve gotta admit it’s close.

PJ’s brows shoot up. “What’s wrong?”

“Please,” I beg. “Don’t ask questions, just come with me.”

He jumps to his feet. “Let’s go.” PJ’s obviously a take-charge kinda guy, since he grabs my arm and tries to haul me out via the front door.

“No! The Champagne rooms. This way.” I wrap my arm around him, tuck my chin into his shoulder and race-walk him the right way. We land in the small hallway that leads to the rooms. Rocco’s there. “Just the two of us,” I say, and start to open the door to the smallest of the rooms.

“Busy,” Rocco says. “Take number three.”

Shit! Number three’s the biggest room, the one for bachelor parties. “That’s all you’ve got?”

“That’s it. Twenty-five.” He sticks his hand out.

PJ jumps right to it, slapping the money into his meaty hand.

Rocco opens the door and I look around. The room holds four sofas and a bunch of straight-backed, armless chairs for lap dances. Two of the sofas are already filled.

I grab PJ by the shoulder so hard he stares at my hand for a second.

“You don’t have to pay me. Just stay until my cousin leaves.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah. He just came in with a bunch of guys. I had no idea he went to strip clubs at all. And I definitely didn’t know he came here.”

“What do we do?”

“Sit on the sofa. I’ll sit next to you and we’ll talk.” I wince. “You’re gonna have to buy champagne. But just get one glass. None for me. They won’t like it, but they can’t make you buy more.”

“Got it. I’m good.” We sit and a cocktail waitress comes over. As expected, she tries to guilt-trip PJ into treating me “like a lady.” What a load. But my guy stands his ground and hands over another twenty five for one stupid glass of cheap champagne.

After he gets his drink, my heart starts to beat at normal rhythm. “I’m so sorry for this. I’ll pay you back. Really.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve got money, and I was gonna give it to you anyway.”

“PJ, no one likes stripper drama.”

He looks me right in the eye. “You’re not a stripper. That’s not who you are. It’s what you do.”

That is possibly the most perfect thing anyone’s ever said to me. Tears sting my eyes and I struggle to stop them. Every other girl in this place would kill to have a guy like PJ to go home to. Even I’m tempted, and I’m all gay, all the time. “Thank you,” I whisper. “That means a lot.”

“It’s true, Chastity. People act like strippers are low-lives, but they’re just women trying to get by.”

He’s so sincere. Like the spokesman for stripper awareness week. “Some of us are low-lives.”

A smile blooms on his remarkably lush lips. “So are some of your customers. And politicians and pastors and teachers and even lobstermen.” When he chuckles his eyes crinkle up. “Hard to believe, but even some lobstermen are low-lives.”

“Shit!” Jared’s at the door, along with a bunch of other guys and two strippers. “I’ve gotta get on your lap. He’s right behind me!” I whisper.

“Can’t we just sneak out?”

“I can’t tell. You have to look. And, if you’re wrong, my life is over.” I’m astride his thighs, my hands gripping his shoulders like a vise.

His eyes widen and his cheeks lose their color. “We can’t sneak out. If he’s the guy in the white baseball cap, he’s right there.”

“Please, please keep an eye on him. If he gets near us, tell me and I’ll hide my face.”

“Okay. I’ve got it under control.”

He doesn’t look like he has it under control. He looks like he wants to pick me up and carry me out of there. But he stands his ground, rock steady. I start to grind against him, going as slowly and gently as I can. He’s never wanted a dance, and I feel like a shit for making him take one. I’m not sure what his problem with dances is, but he wouldn’t be the first guy who didn’t care for them. Maybe he just doesn’t like the idea of blue balls.

PJ’s hands lift, like he’s going to steady me.

“No hands,” I murmur. “The bouncer will be over here in two seconds flat.”

“Sorry. Sorry.” He puts them under his legs and grits his teeth. What’s with him? It’s clear he likes me. Maybe he has that “I’m gonna rescue the poor stripper” thing. A lot of those kinds of guys don’t like to see us do anything sexual. Ruins the victim image.

I’ve never given a lap dance where the guy looks more embarrassed. Or is he just uncomfortable? His legs aren’t nearly as thick as his brother’s. Maybe I’m hurting him. I lift up and do a little air dance for a minute. No better. PJ looks like he’s having a tooth drilled—without Novocain.

“What can I do for you?” I ask, leaning down low to speak into his ear.

He shivers, then shakes his head. “Nothing. I’m good.”

“You don’t look very good. Am I hurting you?”

“Of course not. You’re as light as a feather.”

“Uhm...” This is a touchy topic, but I have to ask. He is a customer. “Want me to get you off? I can do it.”

His smile’s just a little crooked, not quite a smirk, but he definitely thinks that’s funny. “I’m sure you can get guys off, but I don’t think rubbing against me’ll do it.”

I start to slide my hand down his body, but he catches and holds it. “It feels good to have you on my lap. That’s plenty.”

I’m kinda glad he doesn’t want me to make him pop. Maybe I have some strange kinda brotherly feelings for him. I lower myself and barely twitch my hips, trying to make it more playful. “Is Jared getting a dance? Or just watching?”

“Watching.” He blinks. “He’s getting up!”

I dive for PJ, and bury my face against his neck. Guys can’t touch us, but we can touch them. I’m ready to climb into his big jacket and stay there until closing.

“It’s okay,” he says, after a moment. “He sat back down. Now one of the girls is on his lap.” I can feel him swallow. “He was looking at you.”

I sit up like I’d been electrified. “What?”

“I don’t blame him. Even from the back, you’re the best looking woman here.”

Despite my terror, I can’t help but smile at him. “God, I’d love this job if everyone was like you.”

“Maybe I’m one of a kind.” That shy smile has just a touch of cockiness it in this time. Nice addition. Very nice. Maybe I don’t have sisterly feelings for him. I don’t think most sisters have the urge to lean close and kiss their brother’s really handsome face.

It’s incredibly hard to focus. My cousin’s just feet away, I have strange urges to kiss a client, and my client clearly isn’t crazy about having me on his lap. This is one upside-down kinda night. But I do okay grinding—for what seems like hours. Jared and his buddies must have robbed a bank to be in the Champagne room this long. PJ and I are on our third dance, but at least he doesn’t look as pained as he had at the beginning.

PJ’s eyes get big and he whispers, “He’s getting up again!”

I take another dive, and nuzzle into his neck, praying for Jared to vanish.

“He’s gone,” PJ says, at normal volume.

Relief fills me like a warm hug. “You’re a life saver.”

“All I had to do was let a really beautiful woman sit on my lap. I’ll come by every night if you need me to.”

The look he gives me is flirty. Really flirty. Maybe he just needed to have a dance to realize he likes ’em. Only one way to find out. “Ready for the big finish?”

Once again, his eyes widen, but he nods—vacantly. I put my hands behind myself, push into him and mash Miss Kitty against his groin. This move works with every guy. But with PJ? Nothing! Not a trace of a hard-on. I scoot around, searching. Nothing! Has he lost his dick in a fishing accident? Damn! He must have the tiniest pecker on earth. No wonder a lap dance can’t get him off. I fix a smile on my face and sit up. “Good?”

“Great,” he says, a little shakily as he struggles to stand. “I’ll go see if he’s gone.” He pops out the door, and returns in a second. “He’s at a table, right by the entrance to the dressing room. He’ll see you almost anywhere in the club.”

“Move along,” Rocco growls, glaring at me. “I’ve got people waiting.”

I grab PJ’s arm. “What do I do?”

“Will it really ruin your life if he sees you?”

“Forever.” I lose it, starting to cry. Really cry. His arms slip around me as I snuggle up against him. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

He whips off his big coat. “Put this on.” Then his hat settles onto my head. “Follow my feet. Don’t look up.”

Grasping my hand, he strides across the club, not slowing down even at the door. “Where in the hell do you think you’re going?” Nikolai demands.

“Out,” PJ says, continuing to drag me along.

I see a massive hand land on PJ’s shoulder, stopping him like he’s slammed into a wall.

“It’s okay,” I say, yanking the hat from my eyes so Nikolai can see my face. “I want to go with him.”

Nikolai holds on for a few seconds, looking like he wants to do some form of violence, just for fun. Then he pushes PJ, roughly. “All right. But Jocko will fire your ass if you’re not back in the time it takes to smoke a cigarette.”

As soon as we’re free, PJ and I run as fast as we can to reach his truck. It’s like jumping into the ocean—in April. “I’m gonna freeze!”

“Quit complaining! You’ve got my coat!”

“But I don’t have pants!”

“Then we’d better run faster!”

He gets the locks open, and we both jump in. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I murmur, shivering like I’ve been in a meat locker for hours.

He turns the key and the engine roars to life. “Will you lose your job?”

“Probably.” I take a breath. “Yes. Definitely. Leaving during a shift is bad enough. But leaving with a customer? The death penalty.”



“I’m really sorry, Chastity.”

I reach over and ruffle his hair. His cap has flattened it, but even so you can tell it’s really nice hair. That must be why he keeps it long. “Please call me by my real name. It’s Heather.”

His grin is luminous in the dim light. “Okay, Heather. Where to?”

“Good question. I don’t have my keys, so I can’t get my truck. I guess we could go to the diner by the highway.” I look down. “Probably not in a G-string and stripper shoes, though. Damn, my ass is cold!”

“Then we’ll go to...” His brow narrows. “We can go to my parents’, but my mom will have questions. Plenty of ’em. I’m good with that, but you might not be.”

“Other options?”

“Sure. My apartment.” He looks into my eyes and nods decisively. “Let’s do that. We’ll warm up, then I’ll drive you back once we’re sure your cousin’s gone.”

My heartstrings flutter. “You’d do that?”

That beautiful smile blooms again. “I’d do a lot more than that.” He puts the car in first and we start to move.

Great. I’m going home with the nicest guy in Maine. Not the perfect way to make it clear I’m not interested in him. Stripper drama. It gets everyone eventually.

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Most people get antsy after something stressful happens. I must have great powers of denial...I am a stripper...but my nervous energy drains really, really fast. It isn’t ten minutes before my head bangs into the window.

“You okay?”

I sit up straight and rub my head. “Yeah. Yeah. Guess I fell asleep.”

“You must be warming up.” PJ shoots me a smile. “Unless you can sleep with a really cold butt. Sorry about the vinyl seats.”

“I guess I am warm. Or warmer.” I put my hand over one of the blowers. “This thing really cranks the heat out.”

“I’ve got long underwear under this shirt. If you need it...”

“No way. You wouldn’t wear three layers if you didn’t need them.”

“Nah. I came straight from the dock. Didn’t take time to change.”

“I don’t think anything will freeze off. Keep your shirt.” I lean against the door, really, really glad to have PJ’s big coat wrapped around me. I pull the hood up and burrow into the fleece. Then my head hits the window again. “Damn, I’m gonna have a concussion!”

He chuckles softly. “Maybe you’d better stay awake. Or give in and lie down.”

Hmm...I could definitely stretch out a little. Maybe put my head on his lap. Yeah, that’s a good idea. One more clear signal I’m not interested in him. “I’d better stay awake. I’d have to take my seatbelt off if I laid down and I’ve promised my grand-mom I’ll never ride in a car without my belt.”

“That’s nice.” He smiles at me. “That you keep your promises to your grandmother.”

“She’s kept a lot to me. It’s the least I can do.”

“Then let’s keep talking to keep you awake. Uhm...wanna tell me about college? I didn’t get to go, so I don’t know much.”

“It’s barely college. Since I live smack in the middle of nowhere, we just have a couple of rooms in an office in an industrial park. Everything’s on the internet or video conference.”

He looks at me quickly, his eyes big. “Really? They can do that?”

“Yeah. We’re a tiny offshoot of a real community college. I go over there just to use their computers. But you don’t have to. You can be in your pajamas and get an associate’s degree.”

“No football team, huh?”

I laugh at the image of a couple of dozen guys jammed into the computer room. “No. We couldn’t field a ping-pong team.”

“You dating anyone?”

That came out of left field! “Uhm...no. I already dated the only lesbian I know from my town, and I’m sure as hell not gonna date a stripper.”

“What’s wrong with a stripper? They’re just people too.”

I reach over and give his arm a squeeze. “Like I should talk. I’m sure some of the girls would be just fine. But I haven’t met anyone I’m attracted to. Maybe it’d be different if I saw them in regular clothes.” I shake my head. “I’m not into super femmy girls.”

“Nobody in the computer room?” He laughs again. PJ’s sense of humor is right up my alley. Kinda dry, teasing. But not mean. I hate mean.

“I’m there alone half the time. How about you? Any prospects?”

“Nope. Long dry spell for me. Haven’t had a steady girl in...two, no three years.”

“What? A cutie like you? What gives?”

“I guess it’s taken me a while to get over my last girlfriend.” He shoots me a look. “Stomped on my heart.”

“Ooo... Wanna talk about it?”

“Not much to say. Left me for a guy.”

I sit there, waiting for more. When he doesn’t add anything, I say, “Would you have liked it better if she’d left you for a girl?”

That made him laugh. I really like to make him laugh. His face relaxes and makes him look like a teenager. “I guess you’ve got a point. The bad part is the leaving. Not who they left for. Still...it hurt my confidence. Like she needed a dick to be happy.”

Shit! He really doesn’t have one? I thought it was just tiny. Now what do I say? Think! “Uhm...you could always use a strap-on.”

“I guess. But I think she wanted a real man. A fake dick isn’t gonna do the trick if that’s what a woman wants.”

I know I’m an idiot. But I can’t stop myself. I scoot over right next to him, fish out the middle seat belt and buckle up. After I wrap my stiff, cold fingers around his arm, I cuddle it to myself. “Don’t let people make you feel less than you are. You’re a really, really good person. Any woman would be lucky to have someone like you.”

“Any woman?” He turns just enough to let me see his eyes. It’s too dark to see the color, but the intensity is right there.

“Any woman with a bit of sense.” See how neatly I got out of that? Present company excluded.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders. As soon as his warmth reaches me I’m out. All I remember is jostling against him for a minute. Then...nothing.

\*\*\*

I wake when the engine shuts off. Stiff and sore as always, I struggle to sit up and get my bearings. “Are we there?”

“We are.”

I blink to focus, then catch sight of the clock on the dash. “Twelve thirty?”

“Uh-huh. You can call the club and tell them you’re coming back for your stuff. But first, we get warm.”

Just having the truck off for fifteen seconds drains every bit of warmth out of me. “I hope your apartment’s close. Real close.”

“Not too bad.”

He gets out and I follow him out his door. After peeling my bare cheeks off the vinyl. G-strings and plastic are not a great combo. “Shit! It’s freezing!”

“Come on then.” He takes my hand and we run as fast as my ridiculous shoes will let me. It’s a newer building in downtown Portland, with an elevator. We stand in front of it and watch it slowly come down from the fifth floor.

“I hope none of your neighbors come out and see me.” The side wall’s mirrored and I catch a look at myself. A dark brown work jacket with the hood drawn tight around my face. And six inch plastic heels. Kenny from South Park turned into a stripper.

He looks in the mirror too, and a smirk covers his face. “That’s a good look for you.”

The door opens, and it’s completely, blessedly empty. “I hope you can crank your heat up to eighty. I feel like a popsicle.”

“I’m not sure it goes that high, but we’ve got a very hot shower.”

We get to his floor and he leads the way. The apartment’s nice...much nicer than I expect. “Cute place. Did your mom decorate it for you?”

“My mom?” He goes into a bedroom, then emerges with what looks like sweatpants and a couple shirts, with some toasty-looking wool socks on top of the pile. “Shower’s right in there. Don’t worry about running out of hot water. Can’t be done.”

I should stay for a second and at least thank him. But I run for that hot water like a starving man to a buffet. In seconds I’m stark naked, standing under the best stream of water on earth. After a few minutes I thaw out enough to look around. Strange. The room’s kinda...girly. Mostly pale green, but with a little salmon thrown in. But he’d acted insulted when I asked if his mom had done the decorating. Maybe that old girlfriend did it?

I’d been expecting some harsh, guy soap but I wash my makeup off with something that smells more like baby powder than sandalwood. What’s up with that? Finally warm, I get out and dry off.

“Use whatever you need from my medicine cabinet,” he calls out.

I don't even have a comb. PJ has a couple, and after I'd gotten the tangles out I poke around, looking for something to put on my skin. The cold dries it out bad, but I don't hold out much hope for relief. Vaseline, maybe? But he has a big bottle of regular moisture lotion, just waiting for me. How long has that girlfriend been gone? Three years? And he still has her deodorant in his medicine cabinet?

"Are you hungry?" he says, obviously standing right outside.

"Hungry? I shouldn't be. I had a salad just...thirteen hours ago."

His chuckle makes me smile. "Eggs, toast, bagel, tuna sandwich, grilled cheese, omelet, oatmeal..."

"I'll give you a hundred dollars for a grilled cheese."

"I got three lap dances for free. Let's call it even. Coffee?"

"Only when there's no other option."

"Coke?"

"Sold for fifty bucks."

"There's a dryer under the sink. Give me five minutes and your dinner will be ready. I'll take an IOU for the fifty, since I know you don't have your purse."

I take my time, getting my hair completely dry. When I finish, I put on the sweats. They're too long, but fit otherwise. Same with the thermal shirt and the hoodie. The socks are perfect. Something weird's going on. Am I one of a long line of strippers he's lured to his apartment? Only to kill them for their clothes and toiletries?

Quietly exiting, I see him, standing in front of the range. This is the first time he's been in decent light and I spend a minute really looking—fully taking him in. He's obviously used a different shower, because his hair's damp. A white silk undershirt tops snug jeans. What are those indentations on his shoulders? And the horizontal one across his back? Why does his waist taper in just before his hips curve out? I walk up behind him, my hand shaking when I put it on his back. PJ's wearing a bra!

He turns to smile at me. As he turns, I catch the scent of something floral. My eyes focus hard. There isn't a single whisker on his handsome face. His skin, his smell, his build are just like a woman. A woman. A woman! Holy crap! PJ's a woman!

"Almost done. I got a glass out for you, but I didn't know if you wanted ice. The Coke's in the fridge."

I'm as shaky as I'd been when I saw Jared. How can I have been so utterly, ridiculously, stupid? So blind? He...she is tall, and has angular features, but she's all woman. A beautiful, curvy woman, with thick, jet black hair and gorgeous blue eyes and full lips. No wonder I'm attracted to him! Her!

After getting my Coke, I try to stop my hand from shaking long enough to pour it into my glass. Then I lean against the counter and try to sound like a normal person. “Your apartment is really nice. It’s homey.”

“Yeah, it’s okay. Jake would live like an animal, but I need a place to unwind at the end of the day. Having a place that feels like home makes me want to cook, too. That keeps Jake from eating nothing but fast food and beer.”

“You’re a good...” The word stuck in my throat. “Sister.”

“I think you always try to take care of your little brother. You’re an only child?”

“Yeah. Just me and my grand-mom.”

“How’s she doing?”

I take a drink of my Coke. It’s so weird to talk to him like a woman. I don’t know why it’s different, but it really, really is. “She’s good. Back at work, part time. She’s a checker in a grocery, and has to stand all day, so she’s gotta work up to full time.”

She puts the sandwiches on plates, then adds a big handful of chips. My kinda girl.

We take our food and go into the living room. It’s really nice. Much nicer than where I live. A sofa, an upholstered chair and a big recliner don’t even fill the wide room. I take one end of the sofa, and PJ takes the other.

She takes a bite of her sandwich, then daintily wipes her mouth. She’s so clearly a woman! I gotta make an appointment to get my eyes checked. What’s wrong with me? Then it hits me. I’d assumed she was a guy because she’d been dressed like one, and had been in a strip club. After that, I ignored everything that pointed in the other direction. Like I had blinders on. I thought she’d lost her dick, for god’s sake!

“So...if you lose your job...what will you do?” she asks.

“I’m only down three thousand. If I keep making payments, I think they’ll give me a little time.”

“Then you won’t have to strip any more?” She asks that so casually. No judgment. No wonder she’s been so understanding about stripping. Women know what it feels like to be objectified.

“I can’t take the risk. It was stupid...really stupid to do it in the first place. I just...I needed the money and didn’t have any other way to get it.”

“Hey...” She scoots over and puts her arm around me. How had I not felt that soft swell of flesh when I’d cuddled up to her in the truck? “You didn’t do anything wrong. What’s the difference between you

and an actress? You're both trying to turn people on, to make them want to be with you. You just did it one-on-one."

"Thanks." I can feel my cheeks flush. She has the sweetest way of reassuring me. Kinda like a...woman!

"Wanna call the club? If we leave here in an hour, we'll get back right about when they close."

"I've got to finish this sandwich before I can even think about that. It's as good as Grand-mom makes."

"You live with her?"

"Uh-huh. I had an apartment, but I gave it up when we had to start saving every cent. I love Grand-mom, and we get along great, but I'm ready to leave. It's hard to live with family once you've been on your own." I shrug. "I guess that's another reason I haven't hooked up with a woman in ages. The thought of doing it when my grand-mom might hear is not a turn-on."

"I'm with you." She takes a big bite of her sandwich. There's a cute muscle on the side of her jaw that flexes when she chews. "Jake and me aren't very comfortable bringing women home, either." One eyebrow lifts, making her look awfully playful. "But we've both done it. Sometimes you can't resist the urge."

"Yeah. The urge." I'm beginning to get the urge. At least now I don't have to examine my entire orientation just because I want to get back onto her lap. But I'm strangely shy about making the first move. What if she's just being...what? Sisterly?

"Did you ever think about fishing for a living?"

"Huh?" That snaps me out of my fog.

"We'd get home a lot earlier in the day if we had a third. We couldn't pay what you've been making at the club, but I'd bet we could top what you make waitressing."

I blushed again. What's with me? "I could top that by collecting cans. If I make forty bucks a shift, I'm ecstatic." I meet her eyes. She's clearly throwing me a bone. If they need a third, they can easily get an experienced guy at the dock. "But maybe I could find a job in Portland that'd pay a lot more than Norma's Diner in Moose Knuckle."

"That's your town?"

I laugh. "Just a silly nickname for it."

"Uhm... There's a place in Portland that teaches pole dancing. But they call it pole fitness. I hear they're looking for instructors."

She's so cute! Her ears are pink and she can't bear to meet my eyes. She's obviously been scouting out things for me to do. "You do, huh?"

"Yeah. I checked." She shrugs her shoulders. "I thought you could make more money in a bigger city."

"Maybe I could." I put my plate on the table and let myself lean towards her. Make a move, PJ!

Like it's the most natural thing in the world, she wraps her arm around my shoulders. Nuzzling her face against my cheek, she whispers, "I'd really like to have you closer. We've got real colleges, too. With teachers...right there in front of you."

"But I'd have to put on clothes. You can't go to school in your pajamas."

"Might be worth it." She pulls away but stays just a few inches from my face. "I'd do my best to make it worth your while."

"What've you got?" I'm not sure why I feel so comfortable teasing and playing with her. It's like we've known each other for years. So natural.

"Want me to show you?"

"Yeah. I really do." I close my eyes and wait. As her lips find mine, my arms slide around her. What a wonderful sensation! Kissing someone you like is about as good as it gets. Her lips are soft and supple and oh, so warm. Those strong, sure arms tighten around me and I practically swoon. Now that we're in her space—instead of the club—she's utterly confident, sure of herself and damned sexy.

In seconds I'm pinned to the sofa, with PJ's strong, yet soft body pressing into mine. Her voice whispers into my ear. "If we have to leave soon...we'd better stop."

I force my eyes open. "Do you want to stop?"

"I'd rather buy you a new truck than go now."

"It'll be there tomorrow." I kiss her, lingering for a long time. "And even if it's not—I still wouldn't stop."

"Really?" Her head lifts and I catch sight of her eyes. They're nearly glittering. I've never seen a woman look so exited. Exited at the thought of being with me. Not stripper me. Real me.

"Really. But maybe we should go to your room. I'd hate to have Jake come in."

"He's not coming home tonight." Her eyebrows waggle. "All the more reason to go to my room."



“You talked me into it.” She gets up first, then pulls me to my feet. I look up into those calm, clear eyes. “I can’t promise anything, PJ. I’ve got a lot of obligations. But...” She kisses me before I can get the words out.

“Promise you’ll let yourself have fun tonight. That’s all I ask.”

She’s so earnest it’s kinda astounding. “I think I can promise a little more than that!”

Her eyes scan my face slowly. A thumb glides down my cheek. That might be the sweetest caress I’ve ever felt. “Don’t push yourself. We’ll take it slow. I’m not going anywhere.”

Taking my hand, she leads me down the hall and into a nicely decorated room. It isn’t fancy. Just clean and neat, painted a nice blue, with a few pictures of the sea and the rocky coast on the walls. Just like PJ. Pretty, but not showy.

As she starts to undress me, my skin breaks out with goosebumps. Not that I’m cold. She’s kept her word and cranked the heat up as high as it gets. But I’m so looking forward to being with her. In every way.

The hoody falls, then the thermal shirt. She reaches down and yanks the bedspread off, then pulls the sheet and blanket down. I sit, with her standing over me. Her hands glide over my body for a few moments, stopping to inspect a few spots. “What are these from?”

I have to take a look, even though I have a good guess. “The pole. Every time I add a move I get a few new bruises. Usually under my arms and on my thighs.”

“Do they hurt?” She caresses the skin right next to a big one on my arm.

“Hell yes, they hurt. When you hurl yourself against a piece of steel it’s gonna hurt.”

“I’ve got a few too. We can compare.”

“We’ve gotta get you undressed first.” I stand, grab her shirt, and whisk it over her head. Then I unfasten her bra and slide it down her arms. I’m blind. Clearly blind. PJ has a lovely pair of breasts—that I’d completely missed! I trail my fingers down one. “Don’t just stand there. Put that in my mouth.”

She shucks her jeans and long underwear so fast sparks fly. Then she climbs onto the bed and lowers herself over me slowly, placing her breast right at my lips. My mouth waters as I run my tongue all over her. She tastes just like a woman should. Clean, fresh and sweet. “Mmm,” I growl as my mouth fills to overflowing.

PJ growls right along with me, as she pushes herself further into my very eager mouth.

I grasp her ass and hold on tight, rolling over, pinning her to the bed. “Tell me what you like,” I say, almost panting.

She stares at me, like my question has thrown her for a loop. Finally she gives me a lovely smile, while she looks right into my eyes. “Just show me that you like me. That’s all I need.”

“I can play with your breasts?”

“All day,” she says, giggling when I tickle one with my tongue.

“I can go down on you?” My voice hardly sounds like my own. Where did that sexy growl come from?

“Uh-huh. I like everything, Cha...Heather.”

I drop my hand and tickle between her legs. “Can I play inside here?”

“Yes, yes and more yes.” She kisses me so forcefully my eyes roll back in my head. Then she settles me and stretches her body on top of mine.

“You just let me know if I do something you don’t like.” She grins like she’s about to walk through the gates of the world’s best amusement park.

“I like—” Her lips cover mine, then her tongue starts to probe my mouth. Goosebumps cover my body again. She’s so tender but also stone-cold sure of what she wants. No time-wasting questions for PJ. Moving me around effortlessly, she soon has me sitting on her lap while she kisses me so thoroughly I think she’ll never stop. Not that I want her to. I love kissing more than— Something hits me and I freeze. “Wait. Wait.” I put my arms around her and hold on, hoping my heart will stop racing.

She leans back as far as she can, looking at me carefully. “What’s wrong? Did I do something...?”

“No, no.” I suck in a breath. There isn’t enough oxygen all of a sudden.

PJ’s gentle hand goes to my forehead. “You’re really hot. Are you sick?”

“No.” I scoot off her lap, drop my legs over the side of the bed and let my head hang down. That helps a little. No, it helps a lot. “I’m...” Spit it out. She’ll think it’s her if you don’t. “I haven’t had sex in a while. Not since I...” I sit up and turn to face her. “Started stripping.”

She moves to me and puts her hands on my shoulders. “We don’t have to do anything. I’m not in any rush. Really.”

That is a boldfaced lie. But I appreciate that she said it. “I’ll be okay. It’s just different.” Tears fill my eyes. “Damn it, I was sure it wasn’t gonna affect me.”

“Tell me what’s going through your mind. Come on. Say whatever you’re thinking.”

I cuddle up against her, more able to speak when I don't have to look into those piercing eyes. "I just got images in my head of dancing for guys, pushing myself into their faces, especially..." I look up. "Jake. You watched me try and make your brother..." I trail off. I don't have to say it. She was there.

"That was your job. It was an act. Everyone knows that." A soft laugh makes her chest shake. "Jake could never get a girl as hot as you."

Damn! That's the perfect thing to say. "But you can?"

"Seems like it." She grins like a fox. "It's like being in a movie. When you do a sex scene I bet you really try to make the other actor hot for you. I know you want to make the audience hot. But the actors know it's not real. They've got one foot in the fantasy and another in reality. At the end of the day, they don't hook up."

"Tell that to all of the spouses who get kicked to the curb after an on-set romance."

"They're just people. Some of them don't know where the line is...or don't want to stay on the right side of it." She grips my chin to hold me still. "But you did. You weren't trying to get those guys to screw you. You were trying to let them imagine what it'd be like to screw you. And for that—they paid a fee. It's a business, Heather. Just like acting is a business."

"You don't...think about that? It doesn't bother you that I rubbed my ass in strangers' faces? That I tried to turn guys on enough to..."

"It bothers me. But only because I know you didn't enjoy it. I hate that you had to do something you didn't feel good about. That's it." She looks me right in the eye. "I mean that."

"Is that...is that why you didn't want me to dance for you?"

"Yeah." She nods. "I didn't want to play. I really liked you, and I didn't want you to have to act for me. I wanted things to be real between us."

I reach for her and snuggle against her warm body. "I'm so sorry I made you let me grind against you tonight. I could tell you were uncomfortable."

"I was. But I understood. We were both acting tonight."

"Uhm..." I snuggle my face into her neck again. Something makes me want to nuzzle against her forever. "I wasn't acting tonight. For the first time, I wanted to turn someone on. I really wanted to make you come."

"Why don't you do it now?" What a cute wolfish grin!

I push her back against the headboard and snuggle next to her. She starts to relax, but almost immediately shoots up, her body hard and tense. "What about your truck? What if your cousin sees it?"

“He won’t. We have to park way down by the trees. And, even if he did, it’s just another old grey truck. There’s not one thing on it that makes it stand out.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. Now let’s try to get something going here.” I push her back and get astride her thighs. When she smiles, another jolt of panic hits me. Why did I straddle her? The last thing I want is to act like I’m gonna give her a lap dance.

She must sense I’m freezing again. With one tug, she has me on my side, cuddled up against her. “Did you ever have to kiss guys? Was that an...option?”

“No. Never. Some girls did. But a guy couldn’t pay me enough to do that. Too intimate.”

“That’s good. Not that you didn’t kiss, but that you had rules. Pretty soon you’re gonna file this all away. Just remind yourself you stuck to your rules.”

“I did. I could’ve made three times as much if I woulda broken them. But I had to have something to hold onto.”

“You can hold onto me.” She looks down, with the kindest eyes I’ve ever seen sparkling in the moonlight. “I’ll be there for you, Heather. Whenever you need me.”

“I need you now.” I pull her down and let my heart fill with tender feelings for her. Then I try to show her every one of them. Confidently, I walk right into my lobsterwoman’s trap.

The End



"We could do it." Jersey stuffed a kale chip into her mouth. It wasn't attractive, but there was no real good way to eat Kale chips. The things were crumbly, fragile, and freaking delicious. She was willing to stuff. "Couldn't we?" She spoke with her hand over her mouth, and it came out all muffled, messy, and uncertain.

Karma muddled lemon for the martini she was making. If it weren't for her, Jersey wouldn't even know muddling was a thing. But she really liked the Lemon Drops Karma served, so at this point, she was a vocal supporter of muddling and shaking, both required, according to Karma, to make the perfect drink.

"We could totally do it," Karma agreed as she added the lemon and vodka to the metal shaker. "But it won't be easy."

"Really cool shit never is."

Karma nodded, but didn't answer. She poured two perfect drinks into martini glasses with sugared rims. She had that look on her face that told Jersey she was already running the code in her head. She was chasing their idea across the net. She finished her drink before she spoke again.

"We should propose it to the rest of the group."

"Yeah?" Jersey loved a good fight. And she loved to remind the world that humanity was still worth noticing, but changing a hate site's front page to a gay pride flag was worlds away from tapping into the pocketbook of the elite rich. Those people were crazy assholes about their money.

"You having second thoughts?" Karma stopped mid log-in, then twisted around in her chair to face Jersey.

Jersey shrugged. She always had second thoughts. Jail was not an enticing prospect.

Karma typed out a message, and then read it aloud. "What do you think?"

"Should we pick a date? Like do it all at once in one big, epic event?"

"Let's see what the others think."

The others were a group of thirty-seven kickass hackers who, like Jersey and Karma, were good enough to do some truly impressive shit without getting caught. But they'd never attempted such a large scale event before either.

As far as she knew, she and Karma were the only ones who actually knew each other live and in person. She had no idea where the others even lived. They could all be two blocks over, or on the other side of the earth in India, or something. The reason their group worked was because they never talked about anything personal and they respected boundaries. She never tried to trace the rest, and hoped they had afforded her the same courtesy.

Karma was a different story, however, they'd met in a programming class forever ago, before programming was ever considered cool. That's how it all started. Karma dared her to hack into the school's server and alter an entry in the school newspaper. It was so benign. No one even noticed, but she and Karma had been instantly addicted. The dares grew along with their skill level.

And now, here they were contemplating something that no one would consider a harmless, adolescent prank.

"Last chance." Karma sat poised with her finger over the enter button. She looked at Jersey with her eyebrow raised with that sexy half-smile that Jersey found impossible to resist.

She nodded. "Do it."

Karma released the message to the group, and then shut down her laptop. Next, she tackled Jersey to the bed. Jersey pulled her into a long kiss, already working to release the buttons at the front of Karma's shirt.

Life couldn't only be about righting society's wrongs.

#

#### *Recipe Exchange Message Board*

*5/12, 2313 Codinator said: is this shit real?*

*5/12, 2313 rochboss said: looks real. Its from Karma*

*5/12, 2313 Jersey said: It's real. What do you guys think?*

*5/13, 0259 lemonhead said: kick ass. Let's do it.*

*5/13, 0315 spinctthis said: we're all going to jail, aren't we?*

*5/13, 0315 S2x said: probably. Im in.*

*5/13, 0712 rochboss said: Im n 2. But who the fuck came up with the name? Fucking Operation Bearded Clam. That name is bullshit. This is some inspired robin hood bullshit. Deserves a righteous name.*

*5/13, 0713 Jersey said: My project, my name. It stays.*

*5/13, 0713 rochboss said: mssg came frm karma.*

*5/13, 0713 Karma said: Jersey dictated. I typed.*

*5/13, 0714 rochboss said: fck u both. I'm still in.*

*5/13, 0820 ryse said: bitches be crazy. I'm totally hitting this party.*

#

"Lou! Mom said get up. She doesn't want to be late for church again."

Lou was half awake before her brother entered her room yelling about church. According to their mom, Armageddon was near, so the more time they spent in church the better. She was about to respond when Toby ripped her pillow from beneath head, and then smacked her in the face with it. To hell with the end of the world, that little bastard was going to die today.

She chased her brother into the hall and body slammed him into the wall. It shook hard enough for the portrait of their sainted oldest sister to fall off the picture hook. It dropped to the ground, but the glass didn't break, so that was a bonus. Toby bounced off the wall and kept running toward his own room. He almost got the door closed before Lou caught up with him the second time.

"Mom!" Toby yelled for their mother, but Lou could hear her muttering about hell children as she fussed with Rachel's portrait in the hall. She had time.

She pushed her brother onto his bed face down and then jumped on his back. He was two years younger than her, but had gone through a massive growth spurt a few months ago. She had to work hard to keep him from throwing her off.

"Listen you little puke bucket," she bent close to his face and added as much *accidental* spit to her words as possible. He thrashed to get loose, so she drove her knee into his shoulder and twisted his ear with her fingers as hard as she could. He squealed but stopped struggling. "I told you to stay out of my room."

"Mom sent me!" Toby was at that stage where everything he said came out as half-whine, half-yell. As far as Lou was concerned, it was all annoying. "She told me to wake you up."

Lou twisted a little harder. "Did she tell you to sneak attack me in my sleep?"

"Lou, that's enough. Get off your brother." Her mom cuffed the back of her head, then grabbed her shoulder. Her family said I love you with violent affection.

"He started it, mom." Lou stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at her brother. His ear was bright red, and he rubbed at his shoulder where her knee had been.

"I don't care who started it. Get out of this room and go get ready for church."

Toby stuck out his tongue at her, so Lou ducked out of her mom's reach and punched him in the arm hard enough to knock him over. Then she left. It upset their mom when they fought, but she went downright nuclear if they caused her to be late for church. Last time that happened, her mom changed the password for the wifi and refused to give it to Lou. It didn't take Lou long to hack it, but she couldn't let her mom know she was online. It was a pain in the ass.

"We're leaving this house in an hour. Both of you better be ready."



Lou kissed her mom on the cheek as she passed her and promised to be ready. Then she locked herself in her room, crossed to her desk, and logged in to her computer. She liked to check her message boards first thing to see if anything interesting was going on.

She typed in her user name and password for the *Recipe Exchange*, a message board for extreme hackers. These guys were intense and she still couldn't believe they let her join.

There was a new thread labeled *Bearded Clam* with over two hundred comments. She clicked it. The opening post was from a senior member of the group, Karma. She outlined a new group challenge and asked who wanted to participate. Lou read through it three times before she was willing to believe what it said. Then she scanned the rest of the comments. It looked like she was one of the last to chime in. Everyone so far, including *rochboss*, her sponsor for the group, had agreed to participate.

She looked over the original post one more time. Her hands shook as she scrolled up and for the first time in forever, her heart raced at the thought of a new hacking challenge. This was a totally kickass hack, with huge risk if they got caught. Her mom would kill her if she got arrested.

*5/12, 2246 Karma said: The gap between rich and poor in our country is embarrassing. People lose their livelihood, their homes, and their dignity every day, while at the same time, the top 2% continue to amass staggering amounts of wealth. We have the power to change it. I propose the following:*

*Operation Bearded Clam*

*Objective: The redistribution of wealth from the rich bastards to the poor schmucks.*

*Method: Target unrepentant assholes with too much money who are guilty of crimes against humanity. Relieve them of the burden of their riches. This will in turn help them with their search for their missing souls. Transfer assets to the unlucky bastards who went bankrupt beneath the corrupt heels of corporate America.*

There was a healthy amount of follow up discussion about the details, but it added up to some serious felonious hacking. They'd have to access bank accounts. That was Federal.

Lou signed out without responding. She'd think about it, come back to it later.

#

Blender kicked up his skateboard and caught it in his free hand. He was two minutes away from being late for work as he ran into the coffee shop.

"I'm here." He panted, out of breath from the mad dash ride across town. His boss, Brenda, glared at him while he stowed his board by his locker and tied his apron into place. She was forever on his ass about something, acting like the weight of the world rested on their ability to make espresso. As if. He loved coffee, but he wasn't completely insane either. That bitch needed a little perspective.

"You're late."

Blender clocked in on the computer. The time said 4:02 pm. He was scheduled for four. Shit.

"Come on, Brenda, it's only two minutes." He smiled his super charming smile that he knew she liked. Her expression didn't change. "I'll clean the machine tonight. And the bins."

She nodded. He saw the slightest smile forming on her face as she turned, before she walked away. His job was safe for another shift, even if he had to do the two shittiest jobs ever to keep it that way. No point in putting it off. The counter was clear, so he grabbed the cleaner, and a couple of rags. He'd start with the trash bins in the dining room.

He made it through the first one when Brenda came out with her jacket and purse in hand. "I'm headed home for the night." She was almost through the door when she turned back around and said, "And, Brandon, try to be on time tomorrow, okay?" No matter how many times he told her hated to be called Brandon, she insisted. She said that was the name his parents gave him, so it was the name she would use. She really was a bitch sometimes.

"You got it, boss." Blender gave her a salute.

She'd been gone for less than five minutes when his buddy, Rupie, rolled up. He came in with his board under his arm.

"I watched for her to leave."

"Thanks, man, she was already pissed at me for being late. Two minutes."

"Shit, she really needs to get laid."

"I know, right?" Blender pulled the can out of the next trash enclosure. He was totally willing to talk to Rup while working, but that didn't mean he was willing to be a total slacker. He was getting paid to do a job, so he'd do it. His dad had drilled that into his head hard enough for it to stick.

"So, did you decide?" Rup aimed the bottle of spray cleaner like a gun, and made "pew, pew, pew" sounds like a laser going off.

"Yep, you?"

"Nah, I'm still thinking about it. What'd you come up with?"

"Remember how my uncle was laid off two years ago?" It hadn't been just his uncle. The manufacturing facility had closed completely and then moved their operations to China. It had been crippling for the entire town.

"Yeah, of course. That sucked."

"Yeah, well, I did some research. The company reported record earnings that year. And the CEO doubled his own paycheck. He bought an island, an entire fucking island! And a jet." Blender reached for the spray bottle. Rup could postpone his imaginary firefight until later.

"Didn't your uncle lose his house?"

"Yeah, him and about three thousand other people."

"Fuck. So who are you going after? The company or the CEO?"

"Both." When he'd seen the message on *Recipe Exchange*, Blender knew immediately that he'd do it. It took longer to narrow down his target, but now he felt confident. And he was good enough to hit both at the same time. "Hell, maybe I'll do the entire board while I'm at it. They're all greedy fucks."

"True. First you need to help me decide."

Blender finished the second bin and moved to the third. "We'll find you something, man. No worries." He was absolutely confident. There was no shortage of rich greedy bastards to choose from.

#

"Do you ever feel guilty?" Karin sipped her sweet tea. The next time the cabana boy came around, she would order another, except this time with a little something extra to help her get through the rest of the morning. She'd agreed to meet her parents on the island as a concession. She'd had no idea they would invite the dolt sitting next to her.

"About what?" Roger sat in his lounge chair wearing shorts, a polo, and dark sunglasses. He looked at the pool like demons might spring up out of it at any moment. There was absolutely no chance in hell that she was going to get him out to the actual ocean unless it was on her daddy's yacht. She wasn't in the mood to listen to him kiss her daddy's ass, so the yacht was a no go this trip.

"Having so much while others have so little." She pulled up a news report from that morning depicting a tragic fire that had killed hundreds in the slums of Jamaica and displaced even more.

He barely gave it a glance. "They should work harder to change their circumstances."

"Hmmm." She couldn't for the life of her understand what her parents saw in him. Other than his bank account. That was impressive.

A woman wearing a sheer salmon colored sarong strolled by and paused long enough to meet Karin's gaze and hold it. She lifted her glass in a barely perceivable toast, followed by a wink. They'd been flirting back and forth all week and she was having a hell of a time learning the woman's name. Not that it really mattered, she supposed. She could just follow her into the nearest cabana and *introduce* herself. Karin returned her smile and regretfully let her go. Her parents were due any moment.

"Do you know her name?" Karin nudged Roger. Perhaps he might prove useful after all.

"No idea, but I've seen her around all week. I thought you knew her."

"That's William Eastman's daughter, Corina." Karin's mother stepped into the shaded area. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"I heard she's a lesbian." Karin's daddy joined them as well.

Karin stood and kissed both of them in greeting.

"Well that's okay now, right? It's popular with the young people."

With her mother's casual observation, Karin choked on her drink. Her father patted her on the back. As soon as she regained her composure, she reclaimed her seat. Her parents sat as well.

"What about you, dear? Have you ever tried that?" Her mother asked.

"What?" Karin's face flushed with heat. She hoped her mother wasn't going where she thought she was going.

"Being a lesbian." She said it so offhandedly, like she hadn't spent a fortune in campaign dollars with the Republican party fighting the gaying of America. Karin suspected perhaps her mother had tried it and was trying to find a way to work *that* into the conversation. Wouldn't that be something?

Karin watched Corina cross the walkway on the other side of the pool. "I'm thinking about it right now."

"What was that dear?" Her daddy looked up from his paper. He refused to make the transition to electronic news.

Her mother watched her with a small smile, but didn't clarify on her behalf.

"Oh nothing. Daddy, did you see the news about Jamaica? Isn't that terrible?"

"Yes, I've already spoken to your Uncle Adam about making a donation to relief efforts."

That made Karin feel slightly better. At least her parents cared enough to do something, even if it was to just write a check. Tax deductible, of course.

"Roger thinks it's their fault, that they should work harder to improve their circumstances."

Roger sputtered and tried to speak. Her daddy beat him to it. "Well, pumpkin, that's true to a certain degree. Men build their own fate and fortune in life. But that doesn't mean we can't be charitable during a time of need."

Having inherited it from his parents, her father had done nothing to build his fate or fortune. The same could be said about her mother and would be said about her. No one that she knew built their own industry. They all wanted to be seen as trailblazers in business, but none wanted to actually roll up their sleeves to do the blazing.

"I see." Karin collected her things. Corina was just turning the corner to head out of the pool area toward the beach. She looked back at Karin and invited her to come along with a slight tilt of her head. "I'm going for a walk by the water. I'll be back soon."

Roger stood to join her and she thrust her iPad into his hands. "Be a dear and hold onto this for me."

She'd wanted to warn her parents about the plan posted on the Recipe Exchange, but decided against it. They could be victims of circumstance for once. She'd been uncertain about participating, but it seemed her people would do nothing to balance the scales on their own. Now all that was left was to select a target. Roger and his holdings were looking pretty good.

But she'd get to that later, after she introduced herself to William Eastman's lesbian daughter, Corina.

#

Roseberg hit the keys in rapid-fire succession without blinking. The way she stared at the screen made Gillian tired. She worried about things like eye strain and induced seizures, but Roseberg never seemed to be affected.

"Any idea what the meeting is about?" Gillian didn't expect Roseberg to answer. She wasn't much of a gossip despite always knowing the answer. Having mad hacking skills gave her access to all the good information way before it became publicly available.

Roseberg shrugged without looking away from the screen. The motion didn't slow her typing. She read code like the rest of them read the alphabet. "Sort of."

She'd read a story once about computer geeks as tech-mutants. They integrated with the computer and communicated beyond just tapping keys. Watching Roseberg, she thought it was a totally plausible option.

The rest of the team shuffled into the conference room before she could ask Roseberg to clarify. They filled the rest of the seats around the table and stared at Roseberg expectantly, including the team leader. She knew Roseberg had more information than she was giving up.

Roseberg finally stopped typing and then looked up. "Oh, hi." She was always a little clueless about the other humans in the room, further supporting the tech-mutant theory.

"You wanted us to meet?"

"Right." Roseberg tapped a couple of keys and her computer screen shot appeared on the big screen at the front of the room. "This is going to sound weird, but something big is coming."

It did feel a little like John the Baptist foretelling the coming of Christ. Vague and promising. Or foreboding, depending upon your place in history.

"What do you mean?" Gillian asked the question because of all of them, she was most tactful. Sometimes Roseberg required a gentle touch.

"Well, you all know that I monitor all the hacktivist groups as closely as I can. It's not as easy as it sounds because we're talking about a group of people who are just as good as I am."

"Not possible."

Roseberg smiled at the compliment, but continued as if the interruption never happened. "As soon as I get established, one of them gets curious, and the next thing you know, I get the boot. By the time I can work my way back in, they've moved."

"Get to the point." The team leader was getting antsy. He had a stack of paperwork on his desk. Mystery non-briefings probably annoyed him even more than they bothered Gillian.

"I've heard several references to Operation Bearded Clam lately. They're all really excited about it, but no one is sharing details."

"And?"

"And it's never a good idea when people who are capable of collapsing the global economy or launching a nuclear war are that excited about something all at the same time. It's rarely a good thing."

"So why don't you just ask someone?"

"It's kinda like Fight Club. You know? The first rule of Fight Club is that we don't talk about Fight Club? That kind of thing. I've tried to get the information. I get shut down every time."

"Why don't you just follow the cyber trail, or whatever?"

"Normally I would, but they are being super careful about covering their tracks. I'm telling you, this is big."

They all looked toward the leader to figure out how to respond. They really had nothing to go on except Roseberg's intuition. They all trusted her instincts, but this was far too vague to act upon.

"All right. Keep monitoring the situation, and notify us if any new information becomes available. That's all we can do for now."

With that, the team gathered their notes and left the room. Once again, Gillian was alone with Roseberg. She too, gathered her materials, and stood. "You're really worried?"

"I'm flat out scared. This is big and I have no idea what it is."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out." Gillian patted Roseberg on the shoulder as she left the conference room. As much as she sympathized with her friend, she had real bad guys to chase down. She didn't have time for cyber ghosts.

#

Robin checked the screen three times. Penny transactions were not that unusual. They happened occasionally when a merchant needed to verify an account. In the last month, however, the number had tripled. She wasn't sure what it meant, exactly, but she knew enough about covering her ass to know she needed to report it.

She emailed the report to her boss and then forgot about it. She had more important things to worry about than pennies.

#

Karma moved with a natural grace that Jersey would never possess. It colored everything she did, apparent in even the simplest moves. For example, when Jersey hunched over her keyboard, she was merely typing out code. When Karma did it, she was composing a computer-age symphony. Jersey could watch her for hours. And sometimes she did.

"I can see the wheels turning. Tell me what's going on in that head of yours." Karma stopped typing, and then turned in her chair to face Jersey. She hooked her arm over the back of the chair and smiled encouragingly. She found Operation Bearded Clam exhilarating, but the closer they got to Cocktail Hour, the more second thoughts Jersey had. Ironic, really, since the whole thing had originally been Jersey's idea.

Of course, she'd been high on some really awesome reefer at the time. She and Karma had split a blunt, then climbed up to the roof and star gazed. Through the bliss of marijuana haze, leveling the economic playing field in the U.S. seemed brilliant. But with a clear head, the part of her that minored in economics was freaking the hell out. What they were doing had the potential to collapse the world economy.

And there was the pesky added detail of jail time.

"How do you feel about Morocco?" Jersey had poured over the list of countries that didn't have extradition treaties with the United States. Morocco was the only one that was even remotely interesting. The rest varied from neutral to downright terrifying.

"Why? Are you planning a vacation?" Karma looked interested. That was a good start.

"Not exactly." She took a deep breath. It was now or never. Judging by the look on Karma's face, after all the build up, it needed to be now. She went to the dresser and pulled a manila folder out of the top drawer. Inside she had two passports and two state issued driver's licenses. Both fake. She handed one set to Karma. "This is for you."

Karma inspected the license first. She wouldn't find any flaws, Jersey knew. She'd spent a small fortune on the documents, but if it kept the two of them out of jail, it was worth it. Karma set the license

next to her Macbook and opened the passport. She ran her finger over the picture and mouthed the words as she read the name.

"Who's Jordan Louise?"

"You are. And I'm Thelma Martin. But you can call me Telly, for short."

"Is this for real?"

"Yes." Jersey dropped to her knees in front of Karma. "Say you'll come with me."

Karma set the passport on top of the license, and then cupped Jersey's face in her hands. She gave her a gentle kiss that tasted of cigarette tobacco and espresso. "I don't understand."

Normally, Karma was the smart one. Her thoughts ran rampant without censure. She moved fluidly through subjects without hesitation. Jersey was certain that she would understand the instant she saw the falsified documents. Normal people didn't have items like that. Fugitives did.

They weren't on the run from the law yet, but they would be if they followed through with Operation Bearded Clam. And what choice did they have now? The idea originated with them. A good--okay, exceptional--tech would be able to trace it. It would take a long time, but it would happen eventually. They would be found guilty even if they didn't participate. They had inspired a cyber riot.

Their only hope was to be long gone before the threads unraveled. Thus, the documents and the bookmarked flights to Morocco on her laptop. She'd even looked at longer voyages by boat. Travel via ocean liner sounded romantic, but neither of them had been on a boat. She didn't want to learn that they were prone to seasickness when they were a hundred miles off shore with several thousand left to travel. Flying seemed the most logical.

"I think we should leave. Indefinitely."

"To Morocco? If you want to travel, baby, let's go to Jamaica. I've always wanted to go there."

Jersey knew that. She knew all of Karma's dreams, whispered across the pillows at night when they felt brave enough to share their secrets. Of course she'd checked Jamaica. And every other place Karma had ever mentioned. Australia, Brazil, Costa Rica, and so on. The answer had been the same. Extradition.

"Not to visit. I think we should move."

Karma's mouth fell open. "To Morocco?"

Jersey nodded. She could see realization dawning on Karma's face, but it was clouded and distant. "Or any other country you like that doesn't extradite."

Karma dropped her head and played with her hands in her lap. Jersey wanted to see her eyes, but she didn't need to see to know that they were filled with tears. Karma cried easily. If she thought



something was beautiful, she cried. Sad, she cried. Happy, she cried. She felt her emotions with the volume turned all the way up until there was no choice but for them to overflow occasionally.

"I'm sorry, baby. I really am. I just don't see any other way. I would die if they put you in jail." Jersey took Karma's hands in hers. It was small comfort, but she knew it was all Karma would allow in the moment. Karma, her sweet, sensitive girlfriend who loved so much she forgot that others could feel anything else. She would suffocate and shrivel in prison. Why hadn't she thought of that before they hit send on that first message? They'd been high when she thought of it, but didn't have that excuse for the moment they released it into the cyber world.

Karma sniffled, then straightened her shoulders and looked Jersey in the eye. "My home is with you. Here or Morocco, it doesn't matter. If this is what you want, then I'm in."

Jersey kissed Karma through the tears. It was a beautiful speech, but she wasn't an idiot. Unlike her, Karma had a life here--parents, a brother. It would hurt to leave them behind. Karma slid to the floor in her arms and Jersey whispered to her, "I'm so sorry."

#

Eric stared at his screen as the numbers counted down. His finger hovered over the enter button. He'd set his program and everything was ready to go. All he had to do was push the button. The message board was eerily quiet. There was *always* posts popping up, pinging to let him know a new message was available. But not tonight. He imagined the whole forum poised as he was, staring at the thread labeled *Operation Bearded Clam*.

Who the hell came up with a twisted name like that? He was certain it was a not-so-subtle reference to sex, but since he'd never actually been with a woman, he couldn't be sure. He hoped like hell that the action he was about to take wasn't damning him to a first time at the hands of a tattooed prisoner named Rocko.

He wiped his sweaty palms against his jeans. The fabric was rough and did little to absorb the moisture. The countdown marched on.

*Cocktail Hour begins in...*

30...

29...

28...

27...

It would take a while, maybe forever, for the feds to trace down every bit of code that was about to be unleashed. And he was good. Really good. They all were. There was a real chance that they would never be able to trace his code back to him. God knows he'd ran through enough firewalls, and

built in so many trap doors, that it would take Alice and a bottle of her magic potion to find him at this point.

14...

13...

12...

11...

This was it. The point of no return. The sweat on his palms spread until he was pouring off perspiration from every surface of his body. His fingers shook so badly he wondered if he'd even be able to push the enter key when the countdown reached zero.

8...

7...

6...

Would his mom visit him in prison? What about graduation? If he missed the ceremony would they still issue the diploma? He worked hard to earn that, taking English three summers in a row. He hated English. The language was unreliable. Unlike code.

3...

2...

1...

*Launch*

Eric pushed enter, then breathed so hard he almost passed out. He thought it would be a bigger deal, setting in motion a modern day Robin Hood event. But he felt the same. His room looked the same. Confetti didn't fall from the ceiling. His bed was still covered with the Buzz Lightyear bedspread his mom bought for him when he was seven. He wondered what the bedding was like in prison. Probably newer than his.

He puffed his inhaler and focused on breathing evenly. When the fuzzy dots that preceded blacking out faded from his vision, he finally relaxed.

All he could do now was wait.

#

The bus stopped short of the bus stop by a good half-block, but that was pretty normal for this time of night. The driver was half asleep just like the rest of them. Sharon gathered her things before

she shuffled to the exit. She was the last passenger on board, and the driver gave her a half-hearted wave. She pulled her pepper spray from her purse as she stepped from the bus platform onto the solid concrete sidewalk.

This was her least favorite part of working the swing shift. Getting off at midnight wasn't bad until she reached her own neighborhood. The few blocks between her apartment and where the bus let her off were, at times, harrowing. She moved quickly, taking care to watch her surroundings. Yet another street lamp had been broken. She wondered if the street kids held competitions to see who could break the most in one night. At this point, she was more amazed when one worked than when they didn't. It appeared the city had long ago given up on fixing them.

She made it safely from 15th to 19th, and clutched her purse a little tighter. The next block held a row of businesses, including a bank, and a dive bar with windows so dark people couldn't see in or out. She had to pass in front of both in order to get to her apartment which was two blocks farther still.

She and her husband used to own a house. A nice one, with three bedrooms and a swing set in the yard for the kids to play on. Then he'd lost his job and they'd lost the house the next year.

Now the kids played on an empty lot. Sometimes, they'd walk the kids to the school a few blocks over to let them play on the equipment, but half the time they'd interrupt a drug deal mid-score. A few times of that happening, they learned to watch more closely and hang back until things had finished up. When she had her kids with her, the dealers left her alone. But lately, they'd been eying her boy, sizing him up like he had something to offer their organization. She'd kill them all herself if they ever came near her baby.

The bar was quiet tonight. None of the usual noise spilled out into the street, and Sharon felt lucky. She neared the bank and noticed something moving in the shadows near the ATM. It was too uniform, like a fluttering of wings, to be another person. Still, she readied her pepper spray.

Money spewed out of the ATM slot like water from a fountain. She stared, wide-eyed and disbelieving. She almost poked herself in the eye with her pepper spray as she reached up to wipe her eyes. She was certain she must be hallucinating.

She stepped closer slowly and a twenty dollar bill drifted over and landed at her feet. She picked it up. It was definitely real. She looked around. Surely someone was coming to fix this. Banks didn't just give out money in the middle of the night.

The screen on the ATM flashed with a message.

OPERATION BEARDED CLAM  
ECONOMIC LIBERATION FOR THE 98%

It was wrong. God help her, she knew it was wrong. Still, she tucked her chin into her chest and angled her face away from the security camera. And there, she knelt in the street and scooped money

into her bag. She sent a prayer to Jesus with each bill secured, one of thanks, and the next a plea for forgiveness.

The flutter of bills was broken by the sound of shouting from the bar across the street. Sharon looked up to see the drunks pouring out of the building, a human flood to match the bills from the ATM. She gathered one last scoop of twenties, then ran like hell. She didn't want to get caught under foot when the mob reached the machine.

She'd count her bounty later, after she'd checked on her kids and woken her husband.

#

"Jane, honey, what's in this envelope?" Robert came damn close to tripping over the bulky legal sized envelop on his way out the door to work. He didn't have time for this kind of bullshit. His boss was a grade A prick who'd been on the rampage lately. Earlier that week, he'd fired a guy for being late to work. This wasn't Rob's dream job, not by a long shot. Who dreamed about delivering or slinging pizza? But still, the tips he made on deliveries covered the cost of diapers and formula. Barely. Their paychecks combined almost covered the rest. Dream job or not, he needed it.

"What are you talking about?" Jane stepped out of the bedroom. She held Robert Jr. in one arm while she tried to fasten the buttons on her blouse with the other hand.

He waved the envelope. "This was on the front step."

"Why?"

"I have no idea." He set the envelope on the table and then took his son so his wife could finish getting dressed. He would never, ever understand a father who didn't want to be a part of his child's life. Everything in his world changed when Bobby was born. He didn't care what he had to go without. So long as his son was cared for, that's all he needed.

Jane buttoned her blouse, straightened her slacks, and put in her earrings before she picked up the envelope. "Did you open it?"

Rob hated when Jane used that voice with him. The one that said he should have thought of something without her having to tell him. She knew his brain didn't work quite as well as it used to. Before his tour in Iraq, he'd been smart. Thoughts flew through his head. The VA wouldn't admit that anything was wrong with him, but he could feel it. And Jane definitely knew it.

"Not yet. Go ahead."

She turned the envelope over in her hands a few times, inspecting the outside. "It doesn't say anything. There's just a martini glass on the front." She held it up and pointed to the picture. The glass was full with an olive on a toothpick bobbing in the liquid. He could sure go for a good martini. That sounded awesome.

She slit the top of the envelope open and looked inside. Without saying a word, she dropped onto the sofa and cupped her face in her hands. The envelope dropped to the floor and something green shuffled part way out of the opening. Jane rocked in place and cried like he'd never seen before. He didn't know what to do. As her husband though, he knew it was his job to do *something*. He dropped to the floor beside her and shifted the baby to one arm. He wrapped the other around her and whispered comforting things in her ear, like "it'll be okay" and "everything's fine."

She cried so long that he was definitely going to be late for work, but he never let her go. It didn't even occur to him to look in the envelope himself. At some point, she would stop crying and tell him what was wrong.

He was right. She stopped right around the time that Bobby started squirming. His son would only stay still for so long before he wanted to shift positions. He'd stayed still for longer than usual this time.

"What's in the envelope, Jane?"

She scooped it off the floor and held it open to him. The inside was filled with money, one hundred dollar bills it looked like. She kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "The answer to our prayers"

#

Mitchell stood in line with his bank statement clutched in one hand and his wife's hand in the other. He hadn't been able to stop shaking since he opened it. Layla's fingers were turning white from him gripping too hard. He forced himself to relax and she wiggled her fingers, but she didn't let him go. She was holding on just as tight.

They needed that money, but were both afraid it was some cruel joke. With the way things had been going, they'd no more than spend it before they got a letter from the bank saying it was a typo, and they were pulling the money back out of their account. Banks were tricky like that. They could put it in and take it out without you knowing about it.

"Next." The teller called them over.

Mitch spread the paper out on the counter and smoothed it over a couple of times. He'd wrinkled it pretty badly while they were standing in line. "I'd like to talk to someone about this."

The teller, the name plate at her station designated her Dianne, looked at it without picking it up and said, "It's your bank statement." She said it in that snotty service voice. The one that said she was paid to be nice, but really thought he was a pain in the ass and not worth her time. That tone used to make him angry, but Layla changed all that. She taught him to laugh through it. Later, after they'd sorted all this out, she'd make a joke and he'd let go of the little stab the teller's tone took at his pride.

"Listen, Dianne, I'm not asking what the paper is. I want to talk to someone about what it says." He kept his tone level while Layla squeezed his hand in encouragement.

"It says," Dianne read the summary upside down. "That you have seventy-six thousand and change in savings. And ten dollars, twenty-two cents in checking."

"Can you please get your boss for us?" His voice wasn't quite as level, but he considered it a victory that he hadn't started yelling yet. Dianne was a condescending bitch.

"I really don't see why that's necessary."

Mitch took a deep breath, but before he could respond, Layla squeezed his fingers and turned her smile on for Dianne.

"Here's the thing. We know what the form says. We just don't know why it says it. We didn't put the money into that account so we need to talk to someone who can help us sort that out. And since you've managed to alienate us as customers, we'd feel more comfortable speaking with your superior. If you don't want to get your branch manager for us, I'm sure that I can find her on my own. I see her office right over there. We'll just wait inside." Layla smiled like sunshine every time. Mitchell had been caught up in that more than once and knew exactly how Dianne felt in that moment. It was downright mesmerizing.

Layla winked and scooped up the statement before Dianne responded. She blinked, shook her head, and said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Give me just one second."

Layla tugged Mitchell along. He was caught up in her gravitational pull and no amount of resistance would help. They were going into that office regardless of what he, or Dianne, wanted at this point.

Dianne ran ahead of them and barely made it through the door ahead of Layla. The manager sat behind her desk, reading glasses perched on her nose as she reviewed something on her computer screen.

Layla sat in one of the high-backed leather chairs and pointed to the other. Mitchell sat as expected.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Hilden. These customers would like a word with you." Dianne was slightly out of breath when she spoke. Layla had that effect.

"That's fine," Ms. Hilden looked pointedly at Dianne's chest where a nametag would have been had she worn one. The space where Dianne's name should have been was left awkwardly empty. She'd left off her nametag that day. "Thank you."

Dianne shuffled out. Mitchell heard her mutter "Thank God" as she rounded the corner.

"How can I help you?" Ms. Hilden lowered her glasses and set them on the desk in front of her. She had nice eyes. Not as nice as Layla's, but nobody did.

Layla looked at him expectantly. It was his turn to speak again.

"Well, ma'am, you see we received this in the mail this morning." He offered her the bank statement. She took it and looked it over curiously. He already liked her better than Dianne. "There must be some mistake, because we didn't make that deposit." There was only one deposit on the whole statement, so she wouldn't have to guess which one.

Ms. Hilden's face softened. She set the paper on the desk with a small smile. "You're not the first to inquire about a deposit like that."

"No?" Mitchell felt a wave of relief and disappointment. The bank was aware of the mistake. They could get this fixed today. But that also meant the money, tempting as it'd been, really wasn't theirs to keep.

"I assure you the deposit is real. It originated from an offshore account. The only name associated with the account was Operation Bearded Clam. Does that mean anything to you?"

What in the world?

"No clue."

"Let me understand this." Layla leaned forward in her seat and caught Ms. Hilden's gaze. "This money is officially ours. We can spend it and you're not going to come back in a week and say *Whoops! My bad!* and take it all back?"

"No. We cannot. The deposit is not a banking error. The owner of the originating account wants you to have it.

Mitchell couldn't catch his breath. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get any oxygen to go into his lungs. In the periphery of his consciousness, he heard someone say "Hyperventilating" and he felt Layla's steady grip pushing his head down between his legs. The black spots at the edges of his vision receded and he heard Layla whispering in his ear, "It's okay, just breathe, everything is okay" over and over.

As soon as he could, he grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed. She squeezed back just like every other time he'd needed her.

For the first time in a long, long time, he believed that everything really would be okay.

#

"Rona, wait!"

Rona pushed her hand through her hair and counted to ten before turning to face her boss. She was running late and getting too damned close to the daycare cutoff. She couldn't afford the one dollar per minute rate they charged parents who arrived after six pm.

When she was able to breathe without shooting flames out her nostrils, she turned to face Dillon.

"What's up?"

"Do you know anything about the donation labeled *Clam*?"

Rona took another deep breath. She knew Dillon wasn't helpless, but at five forty on Friday night, she was having a hard time remembering that.

"I haven't seen it, no."

"You need to. Now."

Rona put her things in her car, then dutifully followed Dillon back inside. She called her husband on the way. "Can you pick up the kids?"

"Seriously? It's almost six." He sounded just as irritated as she felt.

"I know what time it is. That's why I'm calling." She loved her husband, but sometimes she wanted to hug him until he passed out. That couldn't be normal.

He sighed, but she could hear his keys jingling in the background. "Okay. I'm on my way."

"Thanks."

Dillon led her to an open computer screen and pointed. "Look."

Rona looked. Then she scrubbed her eyes with her fingers and looked again. "It has to be a typo."

"I called the bank."

"And?" Rona couldn't look away. There were too many zeroes in a row.

"They said the money is really in our account."

"That doesn't happen." There was a process. People who donated that much money to a not-for-profit did so publicly after filling out the required tax paperwork. They did not transfer it quietly without informing the charity ahead of time.

"It happened."



"Five million dollars." Rona sat heavily in the chair behind her. The wheels shifted and she rolled back. She didn't have the wherewithal to roll forward again. She shifted her focus from the computer screen to Dillon, then back to the screen. "It has to be a mistake."

"There's more. According to the bank, it's set up as an annual donation."

Rona shook her head. That definitely couldn't be right. Now not only were her eyes failing her, but so was her hearing.

"Could you repeat that?"

"The donor set up the deposits to take place annually on this date indefinitely." Dillon's voice held the same disbelieving quality that Rona was feeling, like this couldn't possibly be true. Except Dillon didn't appear to be on the verge of passing out. Rona had black spots around the edges of her vision.

"Five million dollars?" She repeated the number dumbly.

"Yes." Dillon nodded firmly.

This one donation solved their funding issues. They were no longer under threat of closing, of abandoning the women who needed them.

"We need to celebrate." Excitement swelled inside her and bubbled over. She was giddy with the power of five million dollars. "Let's have a barbeque. Or a pizza party." The kids loved pizza.

"We need to call a meeting to discuss expansion." Dillon was far more practical than Rona, focusing on what the money meant to the business side of things, and Rona was excited about that as well, but first she wanted to share the good news with the families housed there.

"This could mean additional beds." Right now they were limited to twelve rooms with two to four beds each. Single women could share the rooms with two beds and the rooms with four beds were reserved for women with multiple children.

"And upgraded services." Dillon tapped her pencil against the desk absently. It was a habit Rona recognized that signaled that her boss was deep in thought. The woman processed data faster than anyone Rona had ever met.

Like the work transition program they'd been fighting to get off the ground. And maybe an additional counselor. And a daycare service. The possibilities made Rona heady.

"I don't want to wait until Monday." Rona wanted to start right now. This was too big to wait two days. She'd go mad thinking about it.

"You have to. Your family needs you." Dillon smiled sardonically. She'd realized exactly what she'd been asking when she pulled Rona back into the building.

"Right."

"First thing Monday. I'll send out a group message right now." Dillon pulled out her phone and started tapping the keys. As a group they communicated primarily via phone and email. Text message was reserved for the important, impromptu, and not necessarily urgent. It worked well for mass communication on short notice.

"Monday." Rona stood. Dillon was right, her family was waiting for her. She straightened her suit and then pulled Dillon into a hug. This news was too big not to celebrate a little bit. Even if that celebration was limited to a hug between almost friends.

She headed out, dialing the phone as she walked. When her husband picked up she said, "You'll never believe what just happened."

#

"Somebody needs to Goddamn well explain to me where the hell my money is."

Luis adjusted his tie and tried to think of a suitable answer for Clarence Majors. Clarence was his biggest client by far, and as his financial advisor, it was technically Luis's job to answer these questions. Or rather, he was his biggest client until he went on an apparent black out bender and donated all his money to needy human rights charities around the country.

"Well, as I explained, sir, it appears that you have made several sizeable contributions to various charities ranging from Planned Parenthood to the HRC."

Luis suspected that alcohol, drugs, and possibly some amazing pussy had been behind the money transfers. There was no other reason for Clarence to have moved such substantial amounts of money without consulting Luis first.

"I did no such thing." Clarence's nostril's puffed out, his face grew even redder, and the vein in the middle of his forehead throbbed dangerously.

Luis was at a loss. Admittedly, the charities were out of keeping with Clarence's typical right leaning politics, but it didn't change the facts of the matter.

"I'm sorry, sir, but all of these transactions originated with your login identification. No one else could have created the transactions." Most importantly, *Luis* couldn't have created them. He wanted to be very, very clear on that.

"I don't care what that Goddamned machine says. I didn't do this."

Clarence spoke with such conviction that Luis questioned his original theory about women and illegal substances. He had no idea where to go next. The money had been transferred out of several off shore accounts, accounts purposefully outside of US jurisdiction. They couldn't appeal to the US government for investigation when they'd so carefully hidden the funds from the government--and Clarence's ex-wife--in the first place. And the accounts were in countries that didn't investigate. How

you managed your money was your business and no one else's. That was the appeal for men like Clarence.

"Sir, the transactions are very clear. There's no room for doubt."

Clarence shook, a fine sheen of sweat covered his skin and spittle flew from his mouth as he spoke. "You better figure this shit out, Lectrine. I don't pay you to do nothing."

"Sir, I'm a financial advisor, not a computer analyst. I can guide you through your financial investments, but I can't trace and reclaim the money on transactions once they've been made. And I can assure you, sir, I never would have approved these transactions had I been consulted." Luis folded his papers into his briefcase and closed his laptop. He needed get out of this room before Clarence had a stroke. Or killed someone. Either was likely and Luis didn't want to be anywhere in the vicinity when it happened.

"Surely you can do something?" Clarence wrapped his hands into Luis's lapels, wrinkling the tailored silk and staining it with perspiration. His anger was sliding quickly to desperation.

"Well, I might know a guy." Luis pried Clarence's fingers off of his suit jacket. Ronnie, his roommate all through his undergrad years, was a wizard with a computer. Such a wizard, in fact, that he'd spent the last three years in a minimum security facility for being a little too good. "But he won't be cheap."

"Anything. Just get my money back." Clarence smoothed his hands over the damaged fabric, managing only to make matters worse.

"I'll be in touch." Luis took his files and fled while he had a chance. He didn't plan to return. He may not be a computer expert, but he didn't need to be to know that money was gone and no amount of tilting at windmills would make it come back.

#

"We need to form a committee."

"A committee?" Jo asked the question carefully. The Senator was difficult to manage at the best of times, but during times of financial difficulty, specifically his, he was completely beyond her reach.

"Yes, a committee. And a task force. The person, or persons, who perpetrated this crime, must be brought to justice." He smacked his hand against his desk as a final end note. He'd obviously forgotten he was alone in the room with Jo. He didn't have an audience to appreciate his theatrics.

"But, sir, there's no evidence that a crime has even been committed."

The Senator's face turned red and screwed up into an ugly mask of outrage. Before he could turn loose whatever tirade he had building, a knock sounded at the door. Three men entered without waiting to be summoned.

"Good afternoon, Senator. We came right away." The first man extended his hand. He wore a crisp, tailored suit and his black stud cufflinks peeked out of his jacket sleeves..

The Senator, surprisingly enough, shook his hand. More often than not, Jo had seen him turn up his nose like the hand offered somehow became invisible the moment the owner held it out. It was embarrassing for all parties, but she doubted the Senator felt shameful about it even though he damn well should.

"And who exactly are you?" The Senator didn't bother to learn the names and faces of his peers and constituents. He had people to do that for him. Specifically, Jo. She stepped in dutifully.

"Senator, let me introduce Max Caufield, acting Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And this is Lewis Jambre, head of the FCC. Behind him is Secretary of Treasury, Thomas Feem." She stood slightly more erect than usual as she worked through the names. Even though the Senator was ignorant to their titles and positions of power, Jo was painfully aware. These moments brought her past into fine focus and placed it at crosshairs to where she'd climbed.

The Senator urged them all into the adjoining conference room and for once, Jo wished she could politely decline to join them. Listening to privileged men complain about how they'd been victimized struck every wrong nerve in her body. The option, unfortunately, was not hers to take.

"Tell me what you've got." The Senator made the demand before the other men were fully seated.

Mr. Caufield remained standing. He handed Jo a slip of paper with an IP address printed on it. "My team is waiting to be brought in via video conference."

"Frankly, the Treasury Department does not have the resources for a full scale investigation. We are however, very concerned about the events that took place over the past week."

Jo appreciated the Secretary of Treasury's word choice. The Treasury had essentially no liability as the accounts targeted were all based overseas. With the exception of a few random accounts that dumped cash onto the streets in the middle of the night--brilliant, she thought--the lion's share of the transactions took place in other countries where the U.S. held no jurisdiction. With little to no financial culpability, the Treasury Department could afford to look concerned without going into full on panic mode.

"The FCC is primarily concerned with the criminal hacking involved to pull off an operation on this level. This group is highly organized and incredibly skilled. That goes against what we know of typical hacker behavior. Frankly, we have a great deal to be frightened of here. If they can do this, they can do anything. We need to seriously evaluate the security systems in place in our secure government servers."

Jo brought up the video conference while the men postured. It was clear by their lack of direction and zeal that they were in smoke screen mode. There was no actual expectation of recovering

what was taken. That would be a bigger blow to the egos of the targeted families than the hits their bank accounts had taken. She'd checked their finances closely. None of them were in danger of hitting the streets any time soon.

"While the FBI is best positioned in terms of investigative power, we are limited by jurisdiction. Any banking violation that takes place on U.S. soil falls under our watch, but we simply do not have the authority to carry the investigation overseas."

The video conference screen on the wall went live just as Mr. Caufield finished speaking. He looked relieved to see the screen fill with faces. Perhaps he noticed the look of absolute distaste on the Senator's face. He wasn't impressed with anything he'd heard so far.

"Senator, may I present the taskforce assembled to investigate Operation Bearded Clam."

Jo stifled a smile at the FBI Director's straight faced delivery of the term *bearded clam*. The whole thing was ludicrous.

A woman seated at a computer terminal waved and said, "Hi there, I'm Chantrel Roseberg. Mr. Caufield asked me to go over our findings so far."

The Senator grunted, but didn't further acknowledge the greeting. Jo smiled and introduced the group of men assembled. Chantrel visibly swallowed when she finished listing the men and the appropriate accolades to go with each. It appeared she was smart enough to recognize that she'd been put smack in the firing line of some very powerful men.

"Go on, Roseberg. Tell us what you've learned." Mr. Caufield gestured impatiently.

"Very good, sir. Well, you see, there's very little to tell. Whoever did this is very good. I've yet to find any actual evidence of wrong doing. Typically, there is a trail of some sort that I can follow, but almost everything leads overseas where I'm not allowed to follow. And love of job and country aside, violating international computer hacking laws, while well within my ability, would land me some substantial jail time. I'm at an impasse."

"I don't give a good God damn about those laws. I want my God damned money back." The Senator bellowed, complete with red face and more spittle. Jo wished she'd selected a different seat for this meeting.

For her part, Chantrel appeared unaffected. Other than her earlier reaction, she was remarkably calm in the face of such a fit. "With all due respect, Senator, I will not break the law for you. Please do not ask again." She spoke with authority that Jo respected.

Jo smiled and made a small note on her to-do list. She needed to get to know Chantrel Roseberg better. And the Senator needed to send her flowers by way of apology.

"Roseberg, tell me what you do know."

Chantrel kept her gaze on the Senator, a signal that she wouldn't be cowed. After a long, pregnant pause, she turned toward Mr. Caufield. "Sir, I believe I found the origins of Operation Bearded Clam. A well established hacktivist message board called The Recipe Exchange closed down. All files and threads were erased in coordination with the launch of Operation Bearded Clam. I'm pursuing that angle now."

"Very good, Roseberg. Keep me posted." Mr. Caufield turned to Jo. "End the call."

Jo gave Chantrel a small thumbs up as she hit the disconnect button. It probably went unnoticed, but she felt better for having done it. Chantrel had landed in an unenviable position by virtue of being good at her job and she'd handled herself admirably.

"So what you jackasses are telling me is that we're fucked? It's just gone." The Senator seemed to fully grasp the situation for the first time. "Fuck."

Jo sent a quick text to her boyfriend. There was no way she'd make their dinner reservation now. She was in for a long night.

#

Karma laughed as she doubled down again. Blackjack was beyond Jersey. It's not that she didn't understand it, but it was just too simple. Karma couldn't help herself from counting cards. She was going to get them blackballed. Cheating the casino in a country like Morocco was not a smart thing to do. Yet no matter how many times Karma promised to stop, she continued to migrate toward the tables. They drew her like a magnet. All Jersey could do was watch and wait.

Tonight was different though. Tonight Karma wasn't counting. She was playing carelessly, making foolish bets and drinking too much. She looked happy, well-pleased with her life. On the surface, she and Jersey were young and rich. They were jetsetting Americans living a decadent life.

But beneath that lived heartache. Karma missed her family, her old life. And no matter how much Jersey tried to fill the ache, she simply wasn't enough.

But they were safe. And free. That had to be enough for now.

Jersey placed her hand low on Karma's back and drew her away from the tables. "Come on, I have a surprise for you."

She led Karma out of the casino and into the night. They walked together, their hands loosely clasped and swinging between them.

"What's my surprise?"

"I'll show you. Be patient."

"Tease."

"I had to get you out of there somehow, didn't I?" She placed a brief, tender kiss on Karma's cheek. Everything about this woman made her heart bloom with love.

She led her back to the small apartment they'd rented. The light on the landing was burned out and it was hard to see the keyhole with just the moonlight to help. She'd spoken to the landlord, but quickly learned things moved slower in Morocco. He'd listened to her, promised to fix it, and invited them over for a night of cognac and stories. The cognac had been consumed and the stories told weeks ago, but the light was still broken.

She finally got the door open and ushered Karma inside. It was dark there, too, but that had been on purpose. She guided her to the middle of the room and helped her onto the sofa, then she returned to the wall and hit the switch.

It took a few minutes for Jersey's eyes to adjust, so she knew Karma was having the same issue. She waited for realization to set in. It didn't take long.

"Justin!" Karma squealed. A sound Jersey had rarely heard. "Oh my God. What are you doing here?"

She hugged her brother tight and all Jersey heard in response was a muffled "Jersey..."

When Karma released him and turned her face to Jersey, her eyes were filled with tears. "You did this."

"Yes." Jersey stood immobile at the wall, her fingers still touching the switch.

"For me."

"Yes." Anything for her. Jersey would sacrifice everything just for that one moment of happiness in Karma's eyes.

Karma held her gaze for a moment, her eyes shining with unshed tears and love. She turned away with a nod and pulled her brother into another long hug. The perpetual weight that Jersey had pressing on her chest eased a little with Justin's arrival. She'd keep working on it and eventually she'd convince Karma's parents to join them, too. They were resistant now, but she wouldn't give up. Not for her love of Karma.

Only then would she be able to declare Operation Bearded Clam officially over.

THE END

# REBOUND

by Norsebard

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## THE SMALL PRINT:

This Ero-mance (adult romance) belongs in the Beyond Uber category. All characters are created by me, though they may remind you of someone. This story depicts a sexual relationship between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top-right corner and find something else to read.

**Description:** It's always nasty when a relationship comes to a messy end; especially so when someone is thrown out and has the door slammed in her face. When Anita turns up at an old friend's juice and salad bar in downtown Copenhagen to look for a shoulder to cry on after suffering that exact fate, Marlene, the spunky, athletic owner of the Juice-n-More, is more than willing to give Anita strength, moral support and plenty of lovin' while she gets back on her feet...

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## CHAPTER 1

Marlene Damgaard flew down Merchant Street on her eighteen-speed, carbon-frame Nishiki Criterium racer, causing a taxi driver to slam on the brakes behind her, but the thirty-nine year old athletic blonde didn't have time to respond to the honk or even the one-fingered salute the cabbie shot her through the side window.

Pumping the pedals hard, she stared with laser-like focus at the blurry gray street as it flew past her bike; her smoke-tinted sunglasses shading the world in pale blue. Now and then, she caught glimpses of surprised faces belonging to pedestrians she zoomed past, but she was too experienced to get into any dangerous situations.

In a flash - the readout on the computer on her handlebar said she was going at twenty-eight miles per hour - she was past Crystal Street and the Church of Lady Mary, and was headed directly for a group of German tourists who appeared to have just stepped off one of the cruise liners that were docked two-deep down at the other end of Copenhagen Avenue.



At the last moment, she carefully applied the brakes and let the Nishiki slow down to a slightly saner twenty miles per hour, then further down. Once she was going slowly enough, she sat up straight and freewheeled the rest of the way across the Highbridge Square to her shop, the Juice-n-More - the proud winner of the People's Choice Award for the 'Best Juice & Salad Bar In Town 2011' - even though the entire zone was strictly for pedestrians.

On the last stretch, she unhooked her bicycle shoes from the clamps and moved her legs back to stay clear of the hard pedals. Finally coming to a stop outside the Juice-n-More, Marlene jumped off her bike, picked it up and carried the lightweight racer into the shop on her shoulder.

"Morning, boss," Karen Hansen said with a smile and a little wave. Marlene's employee - freckled and with a strawberry-blonde ponytail that made her look roughly fifteen though she had recently turned twenty-two - seemed to be in a good mood as she invariably was on beautiful, sunny July mornings.

As Karen continued preparing the ovens and polishing the counters, Marlene came back out into the store after putting the bicycle in the back office. "Mornin', Karen. The weather's great today, huh? It's hot already, it's gonna be a scorcher later on... maybe even in the high seventies," the older woman said, fluffing her short mop of honey-blonde hair to get it back into the proper casual look.

Standing just shy of five foot six, Marlene's athletic frame appeared almost as wide as she was tall, though it was an optical illusion brought on by her square-cut olive green chinos and her toned, tanned arms and shoulders that were accentuated by her short-sleeved spring green polo shirt that advertised her own shop.

"Yeah!" Karen said and scrunched up her face while she swept a few bread crumbs down into a clear plastic bag. "Hey, we've already had our first customer of the day. It was a Japanese tourist... I think he was Japanese... I guess he coulda been Chinese... anyway, he bought a double pineapple juice and a small salad. I had barely opened up before he was here!"

"Excellent," Marlene said and went behind the counter. Taking an apron, she put it on and tied the laces behind her back. "If we get enough of those, I might even be able to pay your wages this month."

"Awwww," Karen said, following the spiel she and her boss had played every single morning since she had started working at the Juice-n-More.

Nodding and grinning, Marlene went over to the takeaway window and pulled up the metal blinds. After quickly checking how thoroughly Karen had cleaned the aluminum racks, she began to transfer the twenty plastic containers from the refrigerators to the racks, and stripped off the lids so the various salads looked fresh and inviting for their customers.

Three of them - bean sprouts, organic orange peel and strawberries - needed to be changed so she scooped out the old contents and poured them into one of the clear plastic bags they used for

waste before taking three clean containers and filling them with fresh produce.

With everything in place, Marlene stepped out on the Avenue to check how the takeaway window presented itself from the outside. Satisfied that everything looked A-OK, she went back inside and slid into place behind the counter to wait for their next customers.

"Boss, it's two minutes to nine... mind if I listen to the news?" Karen said with her finger hovering above the on-off button on their little radio.

"No, go right ahead, Karen," Marlene said with a smile.

The radio was turned on, and soon, the regular headlines of death, destruction and tax increases filled the juice and salad bar. As the somber newscast droned on in the background, Marlene got herself comfortable on her tall bar stool and looked out onto the sea of humanity that filed past her square view of the world, the takeaway window.

There were several distinct groups of people walking past on Copenhagen Avenue, and for Marlene's experienced eye, it was easy to tell who were potential customers and who weren't: the businessmen and -women who always raced past with their briefcases and expensive suits trying to catch God-knows-what were only interested in the shop at lunch; the locals wearing regular clothes could and did pop in now and then; the streetwise punks with wild hair, torn jeans and provocative T-shirts preferred to get their kicks at the greasy, salty fast food franchises; the transients with their numerous plastic bags and mixed-race mutts couldn't afford it; the glumly dressed people who were on their way to the Church of the Holy Spirit further up the Avenue wouldn't dream of it; and finally, the easily recognizable tourists - always carrying cameras, maps and colorful hats - who provided eighty-five percent of Marlene's business in the summer.

As the news ended and segued into a weather report, Marlene thought back to the day in 2002 where she had decided to start a business. Then, the banks had been easier to deal with, so all she needed to do to get an overdraft facility was to present a thorough, well thought-out business plan and two legal witnesses who were going to act as co-signers - she had brought her parents.

She had been eyeing a store further up Copenhagen Avenue, closer to the City Hall Square, but when the previous owner had moved out, she discovered that every last inch of the plumbing needed to be changed which would have blown her net capital completely.

A week of despair and non-stop bitching later, a new opportunity arose in the shop she was in now; back then, her concept had been that of a traditional coffee and sandwich bar, but after a year of modest success, she had decided to change to an organic and vegetarian concept. The boost hadn't come at once but it had grown steadily from year to year - and the People's Choice Award the Juice-n-More had earned in 2011 had literally been Marlene's proudest moment.

Just as she was pondering the years she had spent watching people walking past, a group of German tourists - a mom and a dad, a grandmother and three children - came up to the takeaway window and started talking excitedly amongst themselves while they debated on what they wanted.

"Uh, hello," the father said, struggling a bit with the language. He started pointing at one of the plastic containers, but before he could say what he wanted, Marlene hopped off her bar stool and came forward.

"Guten Tag. Womit kann ich Sie helfen?" she said in her best high school German. When the children began to jump up and down in glee and the rest of the family all smiled at her in relief, she knew she was about to sell three times the amount of food she would have sold if she hadn't been able to communicate with her customers.

"Karen, I need a hand!" she said loudly over her shoulder after she had taken the orders.

At once, Karen turned off the radio and hurried over to stand behind her boss. As soon as the juice orders were in, she found the fruit in refrigerated drawers under the counter and began to blend them carefully on the machine, filtering out the pits and the flesh, except for one of the orders which called for Grape Fruit Pulp.

While Marlene and Karen were busy servicing their customers at the takeaway window, the glass door was opened and a tall, dark-haired woman wearing yellow knee-length cotton shorts and a thin, white V-neck blouse slipped inside and sat down at the table the furthest away from the street.

"We'll be with you in a moment, Miss!" Karen said, putting a holed lid on the recyclable cups the Juice-n-More used for the beverages.

"No need to hurry," Anita Schott said, crossing her legs and pulling down her shorts so they wouldn't ride up too far. "I don't have anything else to do."

"Uh... okay," Karen said and put the six cups into a carrier frame made of recycled cardboard. She quickly put the carrier frame on the counter next to Marlene who was filling the to-go containers and chatting with the tourists in German about the great weather.

When the orders had been served and the money duly paid, Marlene waved goodbye to the family of six who slowly made their way back down Copenhagen Avenue, no doubt to get to one of the cruise liners. Grinning broadly, she looked at the fifty Kroner note she had been given as a tip. "How about that, Karen? A fifty Kroner tip for a three hundred Kroner order. The day's starting out really well," she said and reached under the counter for a glass jar labeled Tips.

"Yep," Karen said and went down to the other end of the store. "We're sorry for the delay, Miss. Have you thought about what you would like?"

Only then did Marlene notice they had a customer in the shop. For the first two seconds, she was annoyed with Karen for not telling her at once, but then she realized who the mysterious customer actually was.

As the dark-haired woman stepped up to the counter with a shy smile on her face, Marlene froze

in place like a salt lick, simply taking in the picturesque, gorgeous qualities of the woman she hadn't seen for a decade and a half.

Every part of Anita's body and face was like Marlene remembered it, from her long, shapely legs, past her strong hands and forearms to her long, exquisitely sculpted torso, and finally up to her slightly round face that had never been able to hide any of the emotions that coursed through her.

The last part hadn't changed at all. As the two women locked eyes, Anita's chin began to quiver and her eyebrows crept together like she was on the brink of crying.

Marlene resolutely flipped open the hatch in the counter and stepped out into the store itself. Without even the slightest hesitation, she pulled the taller woman into a strong hug and began to run her hands up and down the long back.

The feel of the warm, familiar body that wrapped itself around her own made Marlene think back to the time where she and Anita had been an item. It hadn't lasted that long, just shy of two years, but the period had been one of the best in her life. *'If only we hadn't focused so damn much on our careers back then... where would we have been today?'* she thought, taking in Anita's natural scent that mixed with a whiff of her *Click!* deodorant to create something quite unique.

Pulling back, Marlene briefly gave Anita a peck on the cheek, but reconsidered at once and placed a sweet, little kiss right on the taller woman's lips. Snickering, the two women looked at each other with similar goofy smiles on their faces, though Anita's smile was shaded with a touch of sadness.

"Uh...?" Karen said, rubbing her brow, but Marlene just shot her a steely look that said 'mind the store, please.' - Karen promptly turned around to give her boss a little privacy.

After a little while, Anita pulled back but kept her hands on Marlene's shoulders. "Hi," she said in a velvety, if tiny, voice.

"Hi yourself, you gorgeous creature. It's been a while, huh?" Marlene said quietly.

"It's been fifteen years... can you believe it?"

"No, frankly. Come on, let's sit down," Marlene said and helped Anita over to the table she had only just left. "You look like you aren't too steady on your feet. What's happened? Are you ill?"

"No, no... I... ugh, it isn't pretty."

"I'm all ears, hon."

The two women sat down on opposite sides of the polished aluminum cafe table, but their hands soon found each other in the middle near a colorful Turkish lamp with a tea light. All awkwardness over meeting an old lover was swept aside by the tearful look on Anita's face, and

Marlene had to restrain herself from reaching up and caressing her old friend's cheek.

"Have you ever had a girlfriend kick you out and slam the door in your face?" Anita said quietly, squeezing Marlene's hands.

"No... no one's ever dared to do that to me. Is that why... is that what happened?"

"Yeah. This morning. We had an argument... a real bad one. We've been like cats and dogs for weeks now, but... this was the final straw. We're done," Anita said and wiped her misty eyes.

"Hon, I'm so sorry to hear that," Marlene said and gave her old lover's hand an extra-strong squeeze. "Her loss. You're the sweetest, kindest soul I know. She's gotta be screwin' someone else... I can't explain it otherwise," she continued, shaking her head.

Anita shrugged and began to toy with the Turkish lamp on the table. "Don't know... don't wanna know. It was so unexpected I didn't get my laptop or my wristwatch or anything... not even my phone. I barely got my wallet. I... I... kept an article from a couple of years ago when you got the award so I knew where to find you... I took the Metro here because I needed to talk to a friendly soul."

"I'm glad you did, hon," Marlene said and squeezed Anita's hand again.

The moment was interrupted by the dinging of the little bell above the door, heralding the arrival of two customers - their clothes, the words on their map of the city, and the fact that the wife had an umbrella over her arm suggested they were British.

"Anita, I just gotta..." Marlene said and got up, earning herself a little nod.

"How do you do," Marlene said in her best high school English once she had slipped behind the counter. "What can we do for you?"

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By the time Marlene got back to the aluminum table to continue the conversation, Anita's eyes were more red than pale blue, and she leaned down to give her old friend a little hug from above before sitting down.

Looking up, Anita sent her former lover a wistful smile that soon faded from her lips. "D- do you know what put the final nail in the coffin?" she said quietly.

"No?"

"I accidentally burned her toast this morning. I had made her some yogurt and cereal... Peach Melba and Frosted Flakes... but then the kitchen phone rang. It was one of those surveys, you know, and I didn't want to be rude and hang up... I just couldn't get back to the toaster in time. She flipped out... and when I say flipped out, I mean flipped out."

Marlene narrowed her eyes down into pale green slits and studied every last inch of Anita's emotional face on which her distress was quite visible. "I'm sorry... she kicked you out because you burned her toast? What the hell kinda woman would do that? And what the hell kinda woman can't make her own Goddamned breakfast!? Do I know her?" she said in a voice that changed from growly to frosty as she spoke the sentence.

"I don't know... I don't think so. Her name is Julie Prellwitz," Anita said with a sniff. Her nose started running from the emotional strain she was under, but when she patted the pockets in her shorts to find a handkerchief, she discovered that she had left without one.

"Never heard of her," Marlene said icily, "...which is lucky. For her."

"I met her three years ago at an evening class," Anita continued, but the sniffing took over and turned quite insistent.

"Hang on..." Marlene said and quickly rose from the chair. Hurrying up to the counter, she took three napkins and offered them to her former lover.

"Thanks..." Anita said and blew her nose into the balled-up napkins. Sighing, she looked down and started shaking her head despondently. "I don't know what happened between us. At first, we were great together, but we changed... somehow. After Julie's promotion, she worked more, and when she finally came home at night, she was often so frustrated and upset with how her day had gone at the company that she hardly spoke to me..."

Anita suddenly realized that she was rambling - and not only that, but that she was rambling to a woman she hadn't seen in close to fifteen years. The concerned look on the blonde's face seemed to prove it, and Anita hurriedly wiped her nose again and stuffed the napkins into her shorts pocket. "Oh... gosh, I'm so sorry, Marlene," she said and got up from the chair, "I didn't want to offload all my nonsense on you... you must be bored stiff by now... and you have plenty to do here... I just wanted to see you... so I'll just-"

"Hey, wait a minute... where are you going? Will you let me get a word in edgewise? Come on, sit down and let's talk..." Marlene said and held out her hand.

Anita kept standing at the table for a few seconds while she studied her former lover closely. Unlike Julie, Marlene's face was open and sincere at all times, even if Anita knew the feisty blonde had a temper that could rival anything if she got in the right mood. "But I don't wanna intrude..." she mumbled.

"And you're not... will you give me a break! I haven't seen you in God knows how long... I want to talk to you! I want to know what you're doing now and all those things," Marlene said and got up from the chair to quickly put two strong hands on Anita's elbows. "Tell you what we're gonna do... we're gonna go back to the office so we won't be on show for the world out here, and then I'm gonna make you a cup of coffee. Okay?"

"Well... okay."

"Okay. Hey, Karen!"

"Yeah?" Karen said, standing at the takeaway window.

"Hold the fort. I'll be in the office with my old friend," Marlene said and put a hand on the small of Anita's back. "Call me if you need help."

"Will do, boss," Karen said with a thumbs-up.

Smiling, Marlene turned back to Anita who still looked like she was on the brink of crying.

"Hey... everything's gonna be all right. I promise," she said, gently clawing the taller woman's back.

The statement was meant as support, but it had the exact opposite effect on Anita: with jittering eyebrows, she let out a loud sob and an even louder sniff.

"Oh..." Marlene said and furrowed her brow. "Good thing I have a full box of tissues in the office... c'mon, it's right through here," she said and led Anita down past the soft drink refrigerators and through a white door with a row of brass letters that read Private.

"Watch your step," Marlene said as she held the door open so her surprise guest could get inside.

"Thank you." Sniffing, Anita looked down so she wouldn't trip over the doorstep. Once she was in the office, she was slightly underwhelmed by the small room - and on top of that, she was taken aback by its messy, cluttered appearance.

Though the office at the back of the store wasn't large, it held all the creature comforts one would expect: a couch, a metal desk, two chairs, a low table, a coffee machine, a small refrigerator, a magnet board that was covered by Juice-n-More's old, highly colorful menus and flyers, and a random selection of posters and pictures on the walls. Most were photos of the shop, but to offset that, Chrissie Hynde and Cyndi Lauper were looking down upon the office from retro posters designed to look like they were originals from the mid-1980s.

Marlene guided the blubbing Anita over to the couch and helped her sit down. "There, there... the tissues are on the table. What kind of coffee would you like?" she said, patting her old lover's hand.

"Oh..." - *sniff* - "Just black and strong..." - *sniff* - "with a dash of sugar if you have it."

"Well, I have artificial sweetener," Marlene said and moved over to the coffee machine where she held up a small pack of DuraSweet.

"Uh... it'll do. Half of it, please," Anita said with a nod as she grabbed the first of many tissues from the pale blue box.

Marlene nodded back and tore open the pack to pour half of the sweetener into the branded mug. As she took the glass pot and began to pour the freshly brewed black liquid into it, she couldn't help but look at the older version of her long-lost friend and former lover.

The intervening years had left a few marks on her face, especially at the corners of her eyes and mouth, and she had gained a few pounds here and there along her tall frame, but she was still as beautiful as she had ever been with the same blue eyes that still shone with warmth and intelligence - that never turned into snootiness - the same fidgety hands that never rested anywhere for long, and the same endless, delectable legs that just did not quit.

A stinging pain that shot up from her fingers made Marlene look down and realize that in her infatuation of her new, old friend, she had made one hell of a mess on the small table - namely, black coffee everywhere. "Aw, shit!" she cried, yanking her hand back from the burning hot liquid. "Ouch! Ouch-ouch-ouch... Ouch!"

Yelping, Anita instantly shot up from the couch and bounded over to Marlene's side. With well-rehearsed moves, she took a stack of tissues and began to dab the table to stop the coffee tsunami from reaching the edges. "How on earth did you manage to do that, Marlene?"

" 'Cos I was gawking at you, that's how!" Marlene said and wiped her smarting index finger on a towel. Looking at it, she could see that it had turned red, but she'd survive. "Look... hey... Anita, you don't have to wipe up my mess, you know..." she said and put a calming hand on her old friend's slightly frantic gestures.

"I know, but... it gives me something to do," Anita said with a wistful smile.

"I get that, but-"

Just then, Karen stuck her head in through the door and opened her mouth. She briefly stared at the coffee spill, but soon shrugged. "Boss, we have two customers out here. Another German and a local. I can't speak German, so..."

"Yeah, I'm on it, Karen. I'll be right there," Marlene said and helped Anita wipe up the last coffee and dump the soaked tissues into the paper bin. "Well, I guess the sweetener's been a little diluted, but you can take some more if you want. Okay? I gotta go, but I won't be long."

"Oh sure, you have to mind the store, no problem," Anita said and bent down to take a long sip from the mug so she could carry it over to the couch without further incidents. "Go on."

Once Marlene had left the office, Anita carried the mug back and sat down. After wiping it down carefully, she placed it on a dish mat on the table to let the steaming hot coffee cool off. A few moments later, her eye caught a stack of glittery travel magazines that had been placed haphazardly on a desk at the other side of the office. At first, she tried to ignore it, but it proved too strong and she got up to straighten it out.



Squinting, she still felt that something was off, and she finally took the stack and sorted the magazines in chronological order - then she sat down with a satisfied smile on her face.

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Five minutes later, Marlene came back into the office and joined Anita on the couch. "Anyway... how's the last few years been for you?" she said and put her hand on Anita's knee the way old lovers do. When she caught a glimpse of awkwardness in Anita's eyes at the touch, she put her hands in her lap, the way old lovers often did.

"Okay, I guess. Up and down," Anita said and briefly leaned into Marlene's strong shoulder. "All in all, it's been okay... I can't complain. Julie gave me so much but I don't know how much I really gave her back. I did give her my love, though... I did give her that." - The last words were delivered in a whisper. Shrugging, Anita leaned forward and picked up the mug. With a sigh, she drained it of the last of the coffee.

"And she paid you back by throwing you out when you forgot her toast," Marlene said and turned around so she was facing her tall friend. "Now... okay, to me, right? To me, that's just nuts. Madness personified. When I look at you, I think 'oh my God, who is that Goddess who walks among us?!' But maybe that's just me, I dunno."

Hearing that, Anita snorted loudly and slapped a hand over her mouth. "You must be joking... who are you talking about? I know for a fact it's not me," she mumbled through her fingers.

"Well, of course it's you... silly," Marlene said and once again tried to put a warm hand on Anita's knee. This time, she didn't receive an awkward look for her trouble and kept the hand right where it was. "Hey... I got an idea. I got one hell of an idea and I don't want you to say no to it, okay?"

"Uh... okay...?"

"I have a spare bedroom. Anita, I think you should come home with me tonight... no no, don't give me that look! It's simply so you can spend the night in a safe place!"

"Marlene-

"No, hear me out. Do you feel like... naw, do you \*want\* to go home to Julie tonight? After what she did... after how she made you feel? You don't have to answer, I can see in your eyes that you don't, my old friend," Marlene said and reached up to gently touch the tip of Anita's nose, something that earned her a shy smile. "But what else is there? Rent a hotel room for the night? Sleep on a bench down at the railway station? Go to one of the homeless shelters? Nah, nope and nuh-uh. And I'll throw in another nuh-uh for good measure."

Anita started chewing on her cheek. She knew that Marlene was right, even if she wasn't quite sure how to interpret the look on her old lover's face. For the time being, it was sincere, but she remembered from the old days that a fox-like grin was never far from Marlene's lips - and when

it showed up, it usually meant she was ready for a little amorous entanglement. "Well... thank you for the offer, but is this really convenient for you? Aren't you... well, I honestly thought you'd be seeing someone for sure...?"

"I got no one, baby," Marlene said, accompanied by an overly dramatic sigh. "I'm just me, myself and I. Me and other women... we're like ferries passing in the night... when we meet in the middle, we toot out loud and then we wave goodbye... right?"

Anita chuckled and shook her head. When Marlene's face was too cute to ignore, she quickly pulled the fiery blonde into a hug and gave her a little crush. "Like always, you are very, very hard to decipher."

"Is that a yes?"

"I... well, I guess it is."

Marlene wanted to spew out a few dozen quips, but the raw, tearful look on Anita's face gave her enough of a nudge to keep quiet - for once. She settled for grunting contentedly into Anita's body and responding to the hug.

Once they separated, Anita stole a very quick kiss on Marlene's lips for comfort. "Are you still living in the same grotto?"

"No, I've moved over to the corner of Trepkas Street and Pond Street, just across from the Central Hospital. It's on the fifth floor... I got a clear view of the rescue helicopters when they land on the helipad on the roof of the hospital. Hey..." - Marlene pulled back and studied the blue, highly confused eyes of her old friend, "that's a mighty fine proposition!"

"Uh... what is?"

Getting up from the couch, Marlene went over to the metal desk and picked up her wallet to have money for the taxi she was about to call. "We're going over there now... as in right now," she said and patted her pocket to see if she had her house keys with her.

"But... what about your store? Your employee can't speak German and I really wouldn't want you to lose money just because I need a place to sleep and it's only eleven o'clock so there's plenty of time for me to find someplace else..."

"Anita?"

"Y- yeah?"

"We're going," Marlene said and went back to the couch to grab her old friend's hands.

## CHAPTER 2

Thirty minutes later, the two women stepped out of the taxi and walked across the broad sidewalk to get to the front door of Marlene's apartment building on the corner of Trepkas Street and Pond Street.

The four-lane boulevard behind them was a beehive of activity with hundreds of cars, vans, trucks and motorcycles noisily rushing past in both directions. The nineteen-story Central Hospital was across the street, majestic and foreboding in all its concrete glory.

Just as Anita was looking at the huge structure, an ambulance and a paramedic unit with full lights and sirens came from the right and drove into the hospital's lot.

"Oh, someone's having a worse day than me... boy, they were really loud," she said, looking at the two emergency vehicles as they drove down a large ramp and disappeared from view.

"Yep," Marlene said and unlocked the front door. "Happens around fifty times a day. C'mon, hon. The door's open."

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Upstairs, Marlene unlocked the door to her apartment and swung it open. "Welcome to my new pad, Anita."

"Thank you," Anita said and walked into a hallway. Her first impression was that it was really white, with every wall of every room held in a pleasant shade of chalk. Her second impression was that Marlene's tastes had matured a lot in the fifteen years that had gone by since they had split up.

Back then, the fiery blonde had had plastic palm trees, sack chairs, classic movie posters on the walls, and garishly colored neon lights and lava lamps everywhere, but now, everything was cool and classy.

"The bathroom's the first door on your left," Marlene said and closed the front door behind them. "The spare bedroom you'll be sleeping in is the first on your right, this one," she continued, tapping an index finger on the door handle.

"Okay."

"Yep. It's next to the kitchen as you can see. The second door on the left is my bedroom... and then we have the ensuite," Marlene said, opening a frosted glass door to reveal the rest of the luxurious apartment.

The two large living rooms continued the classy theme by being a cozy den and an open lounge, respectively. The den was held in warmer colors, with a maroon carpet on the floor and a black-framed glass table standing between three armchairs and a comfortable couch that were all clad

in black microfiber. The couch had a blue-and-red plaid spread over it at the far end, and there was a painting matching the plaid's colors on the wall above it.

A large sliding door separated the den from the lounge that was equipped with a beechwood parquet floor and furnished with a low, bright white wooden table, a three-seater couch and two square armchairs, all held in exquisite sandy microfiber.

Two slightly abstract paintings of a pair of whale tails were colorful exclamation points on the off-white walls, and to the left stood a beech sideboard with a pair of blue glass vases and a surprisingly small TV.

"Wow... look at all this," Anita said as she stepped into the lounge. "Goodness me, this is so beautiful... much, much nicer than your old, uh... dungeon."

Grinning, Marlene put a hand on the small of her tall friend's back and guided her further into the lounge. "Thank you. I guess I've grown up."

"You must have..."

"Yeah. Listen, what's mine is yours. Okay? You can kick back and flake out in here or the den, you can take a shower if you like... my bathrobe is probably a little too short for you, but, huh..." - Marlene took the opportunity to sneak a glance at Anita's long legs - "Anyway, if you wanna watch a little teevee, it's all yours. I have sixty channels with a buncha crap on, but you'll find a couple of DVDs in the sideboard, so..."

"Thank you so much, Marlene," Anita said and pulled her friend into a hug. "It really means a lot to me."

"I knew it would, that's why we did it. Yeah? Hey, before I go back to the store, I think I better show you the spare bedroom. I sorta use it for my hobby, and... no, it's not what you think... you perv," Marlene said, grinning broadly at the wide open and slightly shocked look on Anita's face.

"Uh, but I didn't-" Anita said and hurriedly rubbed her chin, but Marlene just shook her head.

"Oh yeah you did! Nah... remember back in the old days, I had a huge collection of furry bedfellows like koalas, teddies, elephants, little monkeys... all kinds of stuff?" Marlene said and hooked her arm inside Anita's. "Well, a couple of years ago, I traded them for an... uh... I better show you."

The two women walked back down the hallway until they were standing at the door to the spare bedroom. Smiling, Marlene depressed the handle and opened the door to reveal - apart from a bed with a Visit Ibiza bedspread - a wooden desk with three antique dollhouses in various states of restoration.

"Oh! My! Goodness!" Anita breathed, staring wide-eyed at the antique toys. "Oh, they're just beautiful! Oh! Look at all those little details!"

"Yeah, they're kinda neat, eh? I traded my collection of bedfellows for the one on the right. I guess it sorta stirred something inside me, and... well, I bought two more. It's such a fun break from the endless slog of mixing salads or working on the balance sheet on the computer, you know," Marlene said and rubbed Anita's back.

Leaning down, Anita peeked into one of the dollhouses to really see the intricate craftsmanship. As she took in the fine details of the miniatures, she found herself needing to reassess her old lover once more. "Oh, I can definitely believe that... they're so beautiful..."

"I'm glad you like 'em," Marlene said and walked back over to the door. "So... uh, I think I'll be going back to the store now. Like I said, make yourself at home. Hey, Anita?"

"Uh, yeah?" Anita said and stood up straight.

Marlene let her eyes glide up the entire length of Anita's body - from her bare feet in sandals, past her silky smooth, endless legs and the yellow shorts, further up along the white v-neck blouse, and finally up to her slightly puzzled but picture-perfect face. "Nothin'," she said with a grin as she left the spare bedroom.

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A quarter past eight in the evening, Marlene locked herself into her apartment and put down a large Styrofoam box and her Nishiki Criterion in the hallway. Out of reflex, she grabbed the door handle for the spare bedroom without considering that her house guest might be inside - dressed or otherwise. "Uh, Anita... are you in here?" she said, but since she already had the door wide open, it was a moot point.

Chuckling over the odd fact that she had to adjust to suddenly living a twosome life, Marlene quickly put the expensive bicycle into the specially designed clamp on the floor and went in search of her guest.

She found Anita sitting on the couch with the TV remote in her limp hand and her head leaned against the backrest - the TV itself was showing the default menu screen of the DVD she had been watching. A half-full glass of very flat-looking mineral water was on the table next to a small plate with a half-eaten chocolate chunk cookie and a few crumbs that proved she'd had more than one.

"Awwww, she's too adorable," Marlene whispered as she tip-toed around the couch to avoid disturbing her slumbering guest. Sitting down carefully, she studied the peaceful face of her former lover, thinking about all the good times they had shared. *'We were great together... hell, we still are. But it would be predatory to catch her on the rebound. Only assholes try to get their hooks into gals when they're this vulnerable... but look at her! Fifteen years older but twice as gorgeous!'*

Marlene's presence stirred Anita from her sleep, and she yawned widely and smacked her lips a

couple of times. Shuffling around on the couch, she forgot she was holding the remote and dropped it which made it hit the carpet with a bump. "Oh... wha... what's that? I'll get it... I'll get- oh..." - only then did she notice that Marlene had returned. "Hi. I must have dozed off..." she said and sat up straight.

"Hi. You looked so cute I didn't want to disturb you. Have you eaten?" Marlene said and reached over to place a tiny little kiss on Anita's soft cheek.

"Yes, I had a couple of cookies. I only wanted one, but it was so good I took another," Anita said and rubbed her weary eyes. "Uh... I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not! Sheesh! Hey... wait a minute...? Did you vacuum?" Marlene said and looked around the lounge. "Holy shit, you have! You've vacuumed the whole dang place, haven't you?"

Nodding, Anita ducked her head down between her shoulders. "Well, I guess I did, yes. I did the dishes and made your bed, too."

"Aw, jeez! You're my guest, hon, not my housemaid! Thanks anyhow, though. I was running out of clean plates."

"You definitely were..."

Marlene grinned and shook her head at her old lover's behavior. "You, my friend, have got to learn how to relax and do nothing. Anyway, I saved us some salad and stuff from the store if you're interested? We could share a bottle of white and, you know... kick back a little...? Watch another movie or something...?"

"That's an awful lot of questions, Marlene. Instead of the movie, could we... uh... would you be insulted if I wanted to make it an early night? It's been a really emotional day..."

"No, hon... c'mon, you know me better than that," Marlene said and reached down for the remote. After stopping the integrated DVD, she turned off the TV and put the remote on the table. "I'm just glad you came to me when you needed a friend. Yeah."

Anita smiled and turned her head to the left to look deeply into Marlene's husky green eyes.

They kept eye contact for a few seconds, but then Marlene grinned broadly and rolled her eyes. "You must be exhausted, hon. You just gave me The Look," she said and briefly ran a hand through Anita's dark locks.

Anita blushed and looked back down at her hands. "I think I'm going to need your help tomorrow, Marlene. I called Julie..."

"Ugh!"

"- and arranged that I'm going over to her apartment first thing tomorrow morning to pick up my

most important things. So... will you help me?"

"You better believe I will, hon!" Marlene said and caressed Anita's shoulder.

"Thank you."

Marlene grabbed the opportunity and leaned in towards her old lover's neck with a throaty purr. "Do you want me to take my tennis racket? You know, for keeping her back in case she tries to make a pass at you?"

Anita's let out a wild snicker that was soon interrupted by a yawn that broke through and left her face wide open. "Oh... pardon..."

"No worries. I think a little salad will do us good now. You just sit here and rest your gorgeous being and I'll provide the food and the wine and... stuff. Okay?" Marlene said and got up from the couch.

"Stuff? What kind of stuff?"

"Two words... oregano breadsticks."

"Oh, I love breadstic-" Anita said but was immediately - and rudely - ambushed by another jaw-breaking yawn.

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The next morning dawned dull and overcast, and Anita could hear a few drops of rain tapping against the window of the spare bedroom as she woke up. Yawning, she rolled over onto her back and stretched out to her full length - plus a little more.

"Ahhhh," she breathed, looking around the smallish room. It was quite full from the items needed for Marlene's hobby, not to mention her Nishiki racer and the spinning bike she used for exercise, but it didn't feel too cramped, merely busy.

After scratching her entire body, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and shuffled around for her sandals. The oversized sleeping shirt she had borrowed was roughly eight inches too short, so she felt rather exposed as she sat on the bed.

Snickering, she got up and pulled the shirt way down so her panties weren't out in the open. She tip-toed over to the door and opened it, and at once, she could hear a radio tuned into Pop FM playing very softly from the kitchen, accompanied by Marlene humming along to an old hit from the 1960s.

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Once nature's business had been taken care of, Anita ventured into the kitchen, thinking

somberly about how her life had been turned upside down by events that had transpired in a similar kitchen only twenty-four hours earlier. Her gloomy thoughts disappeared like the morning dew when she caught a glimpse of Marlene jiggly-wiggling along to the radio.

The feisty blonde had always had a compact frame, but now it had turned athletic, too. She was barefoot and wearing green boxers and a simple, purple spaghetti-strap tank, and her body with the toned legs, arms and shoulders - and a scrumptious rear end - moved in perfect beat to the music.

The sight stirred something so deeply inside Anita that she could hardly recognize the feeling - much less remember the last time she had been that affected by something as simple as a woman dancing in a kitchen.

"Good morning," she said to get away from the warm wave that threatened to sweep over her. Instead of following the wave's call, she went over to one of the cupboards and reached up to get a bowl for her cereal.

"Mornin'," Marlene said and turned around to look at Anita's elongated frame. The too-short sleeping shirt caught her eye and she couldn't stop a crooked grin from gracing her features. "Didya sleep well?"

"It took me a little while to fall asleep, but after that, it was just fine. It was a wonderful bed. Very comfortable. Julie preferred a softer bed, but I never really slept well in it..."

"Anita... jeez," Marlene said and shook her head slowly. Sighing, she turned back to the kitchen table and finished slicing two buns for each. Once they were ready, she put them into the toaster oven, twisted the knob and waited for it to send out its electronic *ding*. "When are you going to learn to look after yourself? Sometimes, you just have to assert your position, girl. They're gonna use you as a doormat if you don't... and that's pretty much what happened, isn't it?"

Shrugging, Anita opened the refrigerator door and took some milk for her cereal. "I guess," she said with a shrug as she put the items down on the small table in the center of the kitchen and started searching for something she could put into the bowl. "Do you have any muesli?"

"Yes, that cupboard right there... it's organic."

"No problem. As long as it's got nuts and raisins, I can eat it... oh... darn, no raisins," Anita said, looking at the clear plastic bag with the breakfast cereal. "Oatmeal flakes, slices of dried banana and papaya, strawberry chunks, whole hazelnuts, sunflower seeds... no raisins."

"Don't like raisins," Marlene said and took the opportunity to stand up on tip-toes and kiss Anita on the neck.

Crinkling her nose, Anita stared at the bag but eventually shrugged and poured some of it out into the bowl.



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An hour and a half later, it was a far more nervous and subdued Anita who stepped out of the station wagon taxi they had called for. On their way to her old apartment, they had stopped at a DIY center to buy five packing cases, but as she put the thick sheets of cardboard under her arm and looked up at the six-story apartment building on Fredericksburg Avenue, a storm of fear and worry raged inside her.

As always when she was nervous, her already jittery hands became like little jumpy kittens, and she simply could not keep them still for more than a few seconds at a time.

Marlene immediately sensed her old friend's anxiety and sought out her free hand to give it an affirming and calming squeeze. "Are you all right? It doesn't have to be today. Perha-

"Yes, it does. I... I have a deadline. I need my laptop. And if I don't do this now, I never will."

"Well, I'll be right there the whole time to back you up. And maybe trade a few barbs with the Dragon Lady from Hell, who knows?" Marlene said with the face of an angel, but the tone of her voice gave away that she very much hoped that she and Anita's old lover would get into a verbal wrestling match.

"Julie isn't like that at all," Anita said quietly as she pressed the button for her old apartment on the intercom by the front door.

"Dunno about that... no way she's playing with a full deck the way she treated you," Marlene mumbled under her breath.

'Yes?' Julie's disembodied voice said from the panel.

The sound of her exes voice sent a string of shivers down Anita's spine and she needed several deep breaths to calm herself down. "It's Anita and a friend," she said in a voice that trembled slightly, "may we come up, please?"

*'I thought you'd come alone...'*

"Well, I didn't."

Anita's statement was never answered - instead, the door was buzzed open and Anita hurriedly opened it out of fear Julie would change her mind and keep her away from all her things.

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A short while later, Anita and Marlene stood in front of the apartment door on the third floor. When Anita noted that her name had already been removed from the little panel next to the door, she gulped and reached for the bell with ice cold fingers.

As the huge, dreaded moment came closer and closer, Marlene scrunched up her face and stared with laser-like intensity at the door. *'I can't wait to see what kind of dragon she must be... man, to throw out my Anita... the sweetest, kindest, least egotistical person I know... hell, that I've ever known! She must be one hell of a-'*

Marlene's slightly less than positive predetermined notion of Anita's recent lover was popped like a soap bubble when the door was opened to reveal a most un-dragon-like curly-haired, brown eyed woman in her mid-thirties wearing a tan business suit and a sad look on her pretty and slightly angular face.

Julie was around five foot five on bare feet - she was carrying a pair of high-heeled shoes that she obviously hadn't had time to put on yet - which would make her a few inches taller than Marlene once the shoes were on.

Grunting, Marlene tried to stand up straighter.

"Hello, Julie," Anita squeaked.

Julie gave Marlene a very thorough - and very silent - Third Degree examination before she averted her eyes back to Anita. "Hello, Anita. Who's your friend?"

"I'm Marlene Damgaard. I'm Anita's moral support. Hi," Marlene said and thrust out her hand. *'If I don't got the height... or the boobs... I sure as shit got the physical presence... look at her, she's just a scrawny little thing... okay, she's pretty... but hey, I ain't that bad, neither!'*

"Hello, Miss Damgaard," Julie said in a cool voice, briefly shaking the hand that was presented to her.

*'I knew it, limp as last week's lettuce,'* Marlene thought, unable to stop a shit-eating grin from spreading over her face.

Anita cleared her throat and put her hand on Marlene's back to get the blonde tiger to calm down a little. "We're here to get my things, Julie. My computer, my watch, my clothes and a couple of other items."

"If it can't be helped...?" Julie said and cocked her head.

*'Uh-oh, torpedoes in the water, Captain Anita,'* Marlene thought at once, no stranger at all to the look Julie was sending the tall woman who was standing between them.

Anita's face grew ever redder at the attention, and she shuffled around on the spot while she searched her mind for something to say. "I think-" - her voice broke and she had to start over, "I think it can't, Julie. I don't think we can get it to work again."

The air was thick with awkwardness and unsaid questions, and each of the three women dealt with it in different ways: Julie scrunched up her face but kept silent, Anita sighed deeply and

looked down at her feet, and Marlene offered Julie a blinding *bye-bye-birdie-she's-better-off-without-ya* grin while she squeezed Anita's hand.

"Well, you better come inside, then," Julie said and stepped aside to let her two guests have access to her apartment.

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In the taxi on the way back to Marlene's place, Anita sighed so often and so deeply that she didn't even have to look at Marlene to let the blonde woman know how she felt.

Her heart and mind had become so numb she could barely breathe - all she could think of was the love she had shared with Julie before their relationship had gone sour. *'Like all my relationships... why? What's wrong with me since I can't even keep a very nice woman like Julie... what am I doing wrong? Am I not trying hard enough? Am I trying too hard? Am I looking in the wrong places? Am I just that unlovable...?'*

As the taxi came to a stop at a red light, Anita looked to her right to study the athletic blonde sitting next to her. A part of her wanted to go for it, wanted to at least play the overture before the moment was gone, but another part was frightened of where it would leave her if it went wrong, too.

The first time she and Marlene had split up, they were both young, carefree and very much focused on their respective careers, and the inevitable post-breakup hangover had only lasted for a couple of weeks until the next dazzling gal had come around - but with maturity came insecurity.

In the end, the frightened part won out and Anita looked straight ahead, at the back of the driver's comb-over. Just as the traffic lights went green, a deep sigh that turned into a muted sob escaped her lips. Embarrassed by her emotional lapse, she tried to hide it with a cough, but the tears that followed gave it away.

"Oh, hon, she's not worth crying over," Marlene said and gave Anita's hands a squeeze. The seat belt meant that she couldn't reach over and give her old lover a hug, but she did the next best thing and caressed Anita's shorts-clad thigh.

"I loved her," Anita said quietly, responding to the caress by placing her hand on top of Marlene's to still it. "Two years of my life... I'm not getting any younger..."

"Oh, bullshit... pardon my French," Marlene said and gave Anita's thigh a very gentle slap.

"Hon, you look better now than you did fifteen years ago! By the time you're fifty, you're gonna be one hell of a knockout! Hey... hey, Anita, I'm not kiddin' here, you know..."

"Thank you for trying to cheer me up..."

"It's in my job description," Marlene said with a grin.

On the final stretch back to the apartment near Trepkas Street, the taxi had to pull over to let an odd-looking ambulance and its police escort through. Unlike the other ambulances that were typically yellow and green, this one was bright red and the rear windows were covered by what looked like golden tin foil.

"That's the vehicle they use when it's a burn victim," Marlene said grimly.

Anita crinkled her nose in sympathy but looked away from the ambulance, unable to contain any more negativity for the time being.

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Once they had paid the cab driver and had deposited the five packing cases on the sidewalk, Marlene checked her watch. "Okay, Peter and his boyfriend should be home now," she said and looked up at the windows of Peter's apartment on the second floor. "They're willing to do most things for two bottles of red."

"Okay," Anita said, stuffing her hands down her shorts pockets.

"Let's give it a shot," Marlene continued and walked over to the panel by the door - unfortunately, the buzz went unanswered. Another attempt yielded the same result. The inevitable comment wasn't long in coming: "Shit..."

"They're not home?"

"Maybe they're, uh, busy," Marlene said with a sly grin. "Uh... okay, let's haul the packing cases inside. Looks like we gotta do it ourselves. But we can do that, can't we? I mean, we're strong, independent, good-looking... sure we can! C'mon!" she said, thumping her fists against each other and then on her chest like a latter-day Tarzan.

"I want some of the medication you're on..." Anita mumbled under her breath. Shaking her head, she grabbed the first of the heavy packing cases and dragged it towards the door.

## CHAPTER 3

*Three days later.*

*'Anita, will you listen-'*

*'No, Marlene, house guests are like fish. Three days and they need to go,' two familiar voices said going down the stairs to the front door of Marlene's apartment building. 'I've arranged everything. It's a sublet apartment, it's very nice, and it's owned by a dear old lady.'*

*'Uh-huh, but you're not a fish!'*

*'It's something I need to do. Didn't you tell me yourself that I needed to be more assertive?'*

*'Yeah, but I didn't mean you had to be more assertive when it came to not wantin' to stay here with me!'*

*'Well, it's just something I need to do, Marlene. I hope you understand. Please hold the door.'*

Grumble, grumble - *'Well, all right.'*

The door swung open to reveal four people carrying packing cases; Anita, Marlene, Peter and finally Peter's boyfriend Thomas who were all displaying wildly different expressions on their faces, though all had a story to tell - Anita was determined, Marlene was miffed, Peter was grinning, and Thomas was simply confused.

Anita put down her packing case on the bed of the carrier cycle she had borrowed from Peter, and pushed it to the side to make room for the other three. Through meticulous and scientific calculations involving endless lists of what would fit where based on size and weight, she had managed to save one packing case by re-sorting the contents.

"Anita, hey..." Marlene said quietly and put her hand on her tall friend's T-shirt clad elbow. "For the very last time, having you here is not a problem. It has never been a problem, and it will never be a problem. Why are you so stubborn all of a sudden?"

When she didn't get an answer, Marlene realized that Anita wouldn't speak her mind with the two interested spectators present, so she spun around and ushered Peter and his boyfriend inside with a pair of gentle but insistent hands on their backs. "Thanks, fellas. I'll drop by with the wine a little later. Okay?" she said as she closed the front door behind them.

Once they were alone - which was a relative term considering they were standing on the sidewalk of a busy boulevard - Marlene went over to the carrier cycle and leaned against it. "Hey... hon, what is this? Huh?" she said, stuffing her hands down the rear pockets of her chinos.

"Oh, I..." Anita said and rubbed her eyes. Sighing, she rubbed them again for good measure and offered Marlene a half-shrug. "I just need a little me-time. Over the last few days, I slipped into the old patterns. I go back to being a servant girl... I just vacuum, do the dishes, make the beds, do the dishes again... all because I don't feel I can bring any emotional substance to the relationship... or in this case, the friendship... and if I can't do that, I can at least do something physical to make you appreciate me."

"Jesus," Marlene said and jumped free of the carrier cycle, "okay, Anita, that's bullshit!"

"No it's not. It's the honest-to-goodness truth."

"No, it's bullshit," Marlene said strongly, leaning in towards her old lover so she didn't have to

shout it out across the boulevard. "I don't know what kind of slave driver Julie was, but I have never asked you to... or God forbid, told you to... vacuum or any of the other things you've been doing while I've been at work. If she couldn't see you as the beautiful creature you are, inside \*and\* out, she's the one with the Goddamned problem!"

"It's not that simple..."

"The hell it isn't! It's not what you do, it's who you are... if you had been lazing about all day in bunny slippers, Capris and a tattered t-shirt, the sight of you would still have put a smile on my face when I got home. That's not to say I don't appreciate that you've made my apartment shine like never before, but that's beside the point."

Anita just shrugged.

"You're kind, witty, ba-yutiful, sexy as all hell \*and\* brainy... you translate books for a living, for cryin' out loud! Look, Anita, you have a ton to offer any gal who's clever enough to consider you an equal partner... but that's the operative term, right? Equal. Partner." - The last two words were emphasized by Marlene poking Anita in the gut with an index finger.

Sighing, Anita rubbed her brow and shot her old lover a disheartened look. "Thank you for trying to cheer me up. I've made up my mind. I need some time alone." - *'Before I mess everything up again... I'm already halfway there,'* she continued in her mind.

Marlene echoed Anita's sigh and moved back from her old friend, crossing her arms over her chest with a sour look on her face. After a few seconds, the darkness gave way to a wry smile, and she put out her arms to invite Anita into a hug.

Wrapping her arms around her old friend, Marlene gave the taller woman a strong crush and a little kiss on the cheek. "All right. I respect your decision one hundred percent... if I didn't, I'd be Julie, and the thought alone gives me the creeps. But I'm coming with you, okay? I mean, to help you carry up the packing cases."

"Thank you," Anita said and replied to the kiss by adding one of her own. "It's only on the first floor so I should be all right."

"Of course, but look at this..." Marlene said and pulled back her right sleeve to show off her toned arm. "Now tell me, does the little old lady have anything to rival this? Eh? I think not!"

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A couple of hours later, Marlene tore through the busy city streets on her Nishiki Criterium, disregarding several, if not most, of the traffic laws. Hunkered down over the handlebars, she had the pedals going at a furious pace to blow off some steam - at one point, she overtook a learner car that was driving in the inside lane.

Coming up to a red light at the large intersection by the City Hall Square, she zipped diagonally

across the six-lane boulevard ahead of the oncoming traffic with very little regard for her own safety. The concrete lanes at the bus stops on the Square itself - always off-limits for bicycles - proved to be an irresistible shortcut, and she took the corner onto West Rampart Street leaning down like a professional.

She didn't sit up in the saddle until she flew past the sign that banned all bicycle riding in the pedestrian zone; with the street quite busy with people of all sizes and ages, she gradually slowed to a walking pace so she wouldn't get tangled up with anyone.

When she got closer to the Juice-n-More, she unhooked her shoes from the clamps on the pedals and jumped off the Nishiki. The sight of several customers standing at the takeaway window talking excitedly amongst themselves put a smile on her face for the first time since she had given Anita a brief goodbye kiss in her new apartment.

There was no doubting the nationality of the customers - French - and as Marlene went past going into the store with her bike, she offered them a broad smile and a confident "Bonjour!" that made them smile back at her.

"Ugh, glad you're here, boss," Karen said with a harried look on their face. "I can't understand a word of what these people are saying!"

"I'll be there in a flash, Karen. Hang on," Marlene said and wheeled the Nishiki into the office.

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An hour later, the mad rush they always experienced at lunch was over and a sated calmness fell over the Juice-n-More. While Karen was resting her feet in the office, Marlene was sitting on a bar stool behind the counter, pretending to read a newspaper.

'Pretending', because all she could think of was Anita. Anita's smile, Anita's laugh, Anita's gorgeous eyes, Anita's endless legs, Anita's sculpted torso, Anita's cute pout their first morning together when she had discovered the muesli didn't contain raisins, Anita's warmth, Anita's lips... especially when they were in contact with her own.

Marlene was so far into her Anita-shaped daydream that she didn't even notice she had a customer. It wasn't before the man cleared his throat loud enough to wake the dead that it dawned on her there was money to be made. "Oh..." she said and got up. "Sorry. I was, uh... I was reading a really interesting article."

The customer - in his late twenties with a full beard, a pair of shades, a white Tuborg t-shirt and a 1970s-style baseball cap advertising Mack Trucks - stepped up to the takeaway window and pointed at the various plastic containers. "I want a hot ciabatta with Chinese leaves, tomatoes, cucumbers, hold the onions, spicy peppers, olives, corn and sweet peas, plus some seasoning sauce. Got that?"

"Yeah," Marlene said and put two halved ciabatta buns into one of the ovens. Taking a scoop,

she started collecting the things the customer had ordered and putting them on a piece of greaseproof paper. As she went through the containers, her eye caught a tall, dark-haired woman who was walking from right to left on the Avenue.

For the first few seconds - while she absentmindedly scooped up the items for the salad sandwich - Marlene thought the woman was Anita, but she could see by the woman's stride that it wasn't.

Behind her, the oven *dinged*, and she quickly took the hot buns and placed them on the counter. With a flurry, she swept the ingredients from the greaseproof paper and into the buns, and finished the takeaway meal by squirting everything with a creamy, non-fattening, organic seasoning sauce and stuffing it down a folded sleeve. "Here you go, Sir. That'll be thirty-five Kroner."

"I'm not paying for that," the man said surly.

"What- why?"

"You put onions in it! I said, hold the onions. I'm not paying for that."

"I did not," Marlene mumbled and pulled aside the top bun to see for herself. Sure enough, there they were, drowned by the creamy, non-fattening, organic seasoning sauce - onion rings, and plenty of them. "Aw, hell," she groaned and started looking around for a fork to get the evil, circular things out of the salad sandwich before the customer lost patience and walked away.

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After another mad scramble around dinner time, the Juice-n-More began to wind down with the rest of the shops and stores along Copenhagen Avenue as the hands of the clock approached eight PM. Marlene had the radio going as she mopped the floor, and she quite literally whistled while she worked.

The mop got a good workout as she gave the floor a thorough scrub to get rid of all the little stains and specs of dirt that always accumulated over the course of the day from the many sandals, shoes and boots that stepped onto the white tiles. She had already put the chairs on top of the polished aluminum cafe tables so she could reach everywhere, and she made sure to mop the legs of the tables to make them extra shiny.

While Marlene was busy, a very familiar tall, dark-haired figure stepped up to the takeaway window and eyed a few of the tasty-looking ingredients. Stifling a snicker, the woman pinched her nose and said: "Uhhh... do you sell fried sausages, lady?" in a distorted voice.

Marlene had time for rolling her eyes and groaning throatily before she noticed she'd had her leg well and truly pulled. "Oh, you," she said and bared her teeth in an unrestrained grin. "No, we don't!"

"Oh, that's too bad," Anita said in her regular voice. "I guess I have to settle for a salad, then."



Marlene suddenly noticed her old friend was wearing clothes she hadn't seen her in before - a very nice purple, long-sleeved T-shirt with silver print on the front that said 'Lady Bartholdy Street Fashion', and a pair of denim shorts that came to mid-thigh. In addition to those items, Anita wore blue canvas sports shoes and a pair of DeMaussey sunglasses that she had pushed up into her hair.

"Uh... I mean, like, wow," Marlene said, cocking her head as she took in Anita's new and improved appearance. "What's going on here? You look hubba-hubba, hon."

"Thank you," Anita said and promptly blushed. "After getting everything set up in my new apartment, I needed to splash out a little. You know, to celebrate."

"Uh-huh? Well, you're a splash, all right."

Snickering, Anita shuffled left and right in front of the takeaway window while holding her hands on her stomach. "I got hungry and I was only one Metro stop away so I thought I'd come and see you. And I wasn't kidding about the salad, I'd really like to buy one."

"Okay...? Well, come in and sit down. I can fix you anything you like," Marlene said and waved her friend inside. As the tall woman entered the store and walked up to the counter, Marlene was hanging over the side to get a better look at the denim shorts - or rather, at Anita's butt. "Hello gorgeous, they're a pretty good fit, huh?"

Anita blushed like mad and ducked her head down between her shoulders. "I think so," she mumbled after a few seconds.

"Aw, you better believe they are. So... the salad. You want a ciabatta bun? They've been popular today."

"No thanks, just a salad. A mixed one, if you don't mind," Anita said and found her wallet.

Marlene shook her head and put her hands on her apron-clad hips. "Tell you one thing right from the start... ain't no way I'm gonna let you pay for it. Nuh-uh. Dinner's on the house, hon. Always. You know that."

"It makes me feel like a leech," Anita said as she put away the wallet.

Marlene couldn't help it - as she looked at Anita, her eyebrows wiggled up and down like a latter-day Groucho Marx. "Best lookin' leech I ever saw," she drawled.

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Five minutes later, Marlene had made Anita a tasty mixed salad that she dug into with gusto while sitting at the same table she had used the first time she had been to the store.

Marlene sat opposite her and simply studied Anita as she ate. Unable to hide the crooked grin on her face, she realized that she didn't have to rely on her daydreams to get a healthy dose of the Anita's - the whole package was right there in front of her.

Behind them, Karen came out of the office and zipped her windbreaker. Looking at the two older women, she shook her head with a smile on her face. "That's it for me this time around, boss. See you tomorrow morning. I suppose you want me to open the shop again...?"

"Uh, yes please, Karen," Marlene said and sat up straight. "I'm grateful that you're here bright and early. I seem to be, uh... unable to... uh-"

"I get it, you don't have to explain a thing. You're unable to get out of bed in the morning, right?" Karen said and winked at her boss. Grinning, she leaned down to whisper: "You know I'm straight, but God she's gorgeous!" for Marlene's ears only before she strolled out of the store.

"Uh-buh... no, we haven't actually- We're not..." Marlene said, but Karen was already long gone. "Okay, that wasn't embarrassing in the least," she continued in a mumble, rubbing her suddenly flushed face.

Anita looked up and dabbed the corners of her mouth on a paper napkin. "What was?"

"Oh, nothin'."

"Yum, this was an excellent salad, Marlene," Anita said and pushed away the empty plastic container. "You definitely know what you're doing."

"Thanks. So... since you're already dressed up like a star, are you doing anything tonight?" Marlene said and casually put her hand across the backrest of her chair.

"Yes."

Grinning, Marlene cocked her head and tried to look the most charming she could. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Like..."

"Yeeeeeah?"

"Finish the chapter I've been translating... and go to bed early. I've discovered that my new landlady has very strict policies on that," Anita said, crumbling up the napkin and throwing it into the plastic container.

When she noticed Marlene's face turn into a mask of disappointment, she chuckled out loud and patted her old friend's hand.

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Five minutes to closing time, Marlene was cleaning out the ovens when the shop's phone rang. Stuck halfway into a toaster oven wearing elbow-length latex gloves and wielding a bottle of organic cleaning fluid, she wasn't exactly in a position to take it.

"Ugh... hey, Anita! Would you mind answering the phone?" she shouted, nodding towards a landline with an extra-extra-extra long cord that was attached to the wall next to the refrigerators.

"I'll get it... I'm on it... I got it," Anita said and hurried out of the office. Clearing her throat, she took the old phone off the hook. "Good evening, this is the Juice-n-More... yes? ... Okay? ... Oh, I really couldn't say, Miss ... you need to speak with the owner. Please hold," she said and put her hand over the receiver.

"Who is it?" Marlene said as she crawled out of the oven, as always cursing the fact that her arms weren't long enough to reach the back part without using an extra-long brush.

"I think it's a potential customer... you need to speak with her. Sounds important."

"Huh, okay... hang on," Marlene said and began to unwrap the tight latex gloves. The left one came off easily enough, but the right one was reluctant to move and ended up in a precarious - and supremely annoying - half-on, half-off position. "Aw, hell," she said, rolling her eyes.

Giving up for the time being, she went over to Anita and waved the receiver over to her with her flapping, latex-green hand. "Good evening, this is Marlene Damgaard, the owner of Juice-n-More. How can we help you?"

*'Hello, my name is Jeanette Christophersen and I'm in real trouble!'*

"Uh... okay?" Marlene said, staring at the receiver.

Anita did her own bit of staring, but her eyes were directed at the flappy glove. Grunting, she went to work slipping it off Marlene's hand.

*'I'm getting married tomorrow...'*

"Huh, congratulations."

*'- thank you... but it's going to be a disaster if we can't get it reorganized in a hurry! My wife-to-be and I had already booked the King's Dining Room restaurant for the post-ceremonial dinner, but when they discovered we were two women, they somehow accidentally lost our booking...'*

"Buncha assholes," Marlene grumbled, finally escaping the clutches of the evil Latex Glove Monster. She mouthed a quick Thanks to Anita before sitting down on the tall bar stool.

*'That's what I said! Then I remembered seeing an ad from the Juice-n-More in the Out & Around magazine, and... and...'*

"How many guests are we talking about, exactly?"

*'Twenty-two in total! We've already sent out the invitations for four o'clock! Now we need to call everyone and-'*

"Uh, yeah, okay... hang on," Marlene said and rubbed her brow. She glanced at the tables, at her stock of salads, buns, sodas and juices, and finally at Anita's highly puzzled face. Calculating furiously in her head, she came to the conclusion that it could work - just. "Hello, are you still there?" she continued into the telephone.

*'Yes!'*

"Just to make sure we're both on the same page, you'll be twenty-two people tomorrow afternoon at four... yeah?"

Hearing that, Anita's eyebrows went up to her hairline at rocket speed.

*'That's right, nineteen adults and three kids- well, teenagers.'*

"Okay. Hmmm. Hmmm. Hmmm," Marlene said and whipped down some numbers on her order book. "All right... oh, and you do realize it's a vegetarian restaurant, right? We don't serve alcohol, either, as we don't have a liquor license. And when I say it's vegetarian, I do mean it. We don't do meat of any kind, not even ham in the salads."

*'Oh, we know, Miss Damgaard. That's one of the reasons we decided to give you a call.'*

"Right. Okay. Hmmm, a rough guesstimate says, oh, in the vicinity of seven thousand Kroner. That includes free salad with optional ciabattas, focaccias, naan bread or beer bread, and beverages for all twenty-two. We have diet sodas, fourteen kinds of juice and bottled mineral water... carbonated and uncarbo spring water."

*'Seven thousand...?'*

The line went silent for a while, and Marlene took the opportunity to recheck her figures. She scrunched up her forehead when she realized she wouldn't be able to go any lower if Jeanette Christophersen felt it was too steep.

*'Hello?'*

"I'm here, Miss Christophersen."

*'We can accept seven thousand. In fact, the King's Dining Room wanted twelve thousand, though we did order wine there. If you can handle us, you've got a deal, Miss Damgaard.'*

"Excellent," Marlene said and sent Anita a big thumbs-up. "We'll get on top of everything."

*'Oh, that's so great! My Dad is going to swing by early tomorrow with the money... uh, before the ceremony so you can see we're not trying to con you.'*

"Okay," Marlene said and made a note of that on the order book. "Are you going for the whole wedding extravaganza in a church, or...?"

*'Yes, the Church of the Holy Spirit. It's just up the Avenue from where you are. That's why my honey and I hoped you'd be able to have us.'*

"Wow, that's a great church, I attended a baptism there last year. Well, best of luck with everything. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, Miss Christophersen. Goodbye."

*'Bye!'*

"Wow," Marlene said and walked over to the wall to hang up the receiver.

By now, Anita was bursting at the seams to be let in on the big news. She performed an impatient little shuffle on the floor to let Marlene know that it was high time she spilled the beans. "Well...? What was that all about?"

Marlene went up to her tall friend and put her hands around the inviting waist. "A couple of gals have just hired us to take care of their post-ceremonial dinner. Twenty-two people... yikes, we're gonna be busy... we're gonna be so busy I won't even have time to spell b-e-z-e-e. They'll be here at four... well, probably sooner than that."

"Yikes," Anita said and scratched the side of her nose while she digested Marlene's words. "So we're caterers now?"

"No, here! They're coming here, hon!" Marlene said, gesturing wildly with her hands.

Anita blinked a few times and looked at the aluminum tables that didn't seem to offer enough seats for that many people. "Okay... some of 'em will have to sit on each other's lap," she drawled.

"Ah, it's gonna be fine... last year, I had nineteen people in here at a hen night. Twenty-two will work just fine... just fine," Marlene said, grinning from ear to ear.

Anita blinked again and shook her head slowly. "You're gonna need some help. Do you have an apron in my size?"

## **CHAPTER 4**

Twenty to four the next day, Marlene was standing in the middle of Copenhagen Avenue wearing a pair of black slacks, the short-sleeved spring green polo shirt that advertised her shop,

and a white apron that also carried an ad for Juice-n-More.

Squinting hard, she shielded her eyes from the late afternoon sun while she looked up the Avenue to try to suss out when the first of their customers would arrive. The church bells had rung merrily at half past three marking the end of the ceremony, but the street had only seen the regular activity since then - namely the waves of people who always seemed to be on a journey from A to B at all hours of the day.

"Mmmm," she said and shuffled over to the two flagpoles she had put up outside the closed takeaway window; the Rainbow standard and the Danish flag, the Dannebrog, were both flying proudly. Trying to kill time, she fluffed the two flags to make them stand out better, but the wind came from the wrong angle so they weren't up to much.

Colorful movement to her right made her walk back out into the middle of the Avenue and shield her eyes - two hundred yards further up, a group of well-dressed men and women walked arm in arm, seemingly in high spirits. "Gotta be the first of 'em," Marlene said and strode inside. "Line up!" she barked the moment she stepped into the shop.

Anita jumped up from the table she had been sitting at and stood at perfect Attention. A second later, Karen came hurrying out from the office and lined up next to her tall co-worker - both women were wearing black slacks, spring green polo shirts and white aprons.

"Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm, okay, okay... oh no, that's gotta go," Marlene said and folded down Karen's collar that she had flipped up in a fit of youthful exuberance. "Much better. And Anita... nah, no need to change a thing about you," she continued and quickly stood up on tip-toes to place a little kiss on the tall woman's lips.

Karen cleared her throat as she looked at the tender scene. "Actually, boss, I think the union would call that sexual harassment..."

"Oh, phooey. All right, there they are," Marlene said and spun around to greet the first of their guests.

The group of well-dressed men and women she had seen on the Avenue came up to the shop and waited by the Rainbow flag. After checking the marquee above the storefront windows, one of them reached into his tuxedo jacket and found a comb that he used to smooth down his heavily gelled hair.

"What the hell are they waiting for?" Marlene said out of the corner of her mouth.

"No idea," Anita said as she looked over Marlene's shoulder. "Do you want me to go out and ask?"

"No. Not yet. Maybe in a few minutes."

The situation was resolved when one of the women hooked her arm inside the man with the

comb and went into the store. "Hi. We're with Jeanette's and Nina's wedding party. This is the Juice-n-More, right?" she said hesitantly. In her early thirties, the woman wore a loud, flowery dress that matched her large, moussed hair and her white gloves to a T.

"That's right, Miss," Marlene said with a smile.

"Okay... uh, it got a little confused down at the church. The photographer took a lot longer than he should have and, uh, Jeanette got a little, uh, hot under her collar."

"Right. Yeah... happens." - Marlene turned around and shot Anita a wink that was responded to in kind.

*"They're coming!"* one of the others shouted from the Avenue, and the two people hurried back out to greet the newlyweds.

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Before long, the space outside the Juice-n-More was awash with well-dressed people who shouted so many Hurrahs and took so many pictures that it resembled a Hollywood premiere rather than the forecourt of a juice and salad bar.

In the middle of it all stood Jeanette and her new wife with an arm around each other's waist, wearing identical goofy grins, holding identical flowers and dressed in identical white tuxedos with bluish violets in their lapels. The happy couple tried to wave to everybody while they were bathed in flashes from the many cameras pointed at them, but they were unable to keep up with the requests.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Anita said, sniffing hard and pressing her brow flat against the window to see better. "Awww... look at them... they look so happy. Oh no... I'm gonna cry..."

"Here," Marlene said and handed her old friend a clean handkerchief. "You better blow your nose, honey. Won't look good on the window..."

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Once the photo session was over, the newlyweds and their guests all turned around and swarmed into the Juice-n-More much to Marlene's excitement.

Soon, she was herding the wedding guests like a traffic officer, directing them to the table they were supposed to sit at according to the meticulous plan Jeanette's father had brought along when he had come with the money earlier in the day.

Before long, most people had found their seats and had made themselves comfortable, though there were one or two grumbles heard about the hard chairs.

"All right!" Marlene said strongly to break through the din that rose like a tide from the many

guests. "All right, may I have your attention, please! First of all, I would like to congratulate the blushing brides. In my humble opinion, you look wonderful together... I'm sure your guests will agree."

An excited cheer rose from the crowd, but Marlene managed to subdue it by putting up her hands. "You will find our menus on the tables. In a few minutes, my lovely assistants and I will go from table to table and take your orders. We will make 'em as fast as we can so there's no need to shout... shouting makes no salads, get it?"

Along with their guests, Jeanette and her new wife duly laughed and turned to study their menus. It didn't take them long to put it down and look at Marlene to indicate they were ready to order.

Behind the counter, Marlene and Anita worked flat out at preparing the plastic containers with the ingredients and the stacks of buns and bread they were certain to use. Looking up and locking eyes with Jeanette, Marlene nudged Anita's side. "They're ready. I'll take the newlyweds myself. Please take the table with the parents first... they're most likely to get miffed if it takes too long."

"Yes, boss," Anita said and wiped her hands on a towel before taking a brand new order book.

Marlene quickly went over to the table with the brides and offered them her broadest smile. "Once again congratulations," she said and put out her hand. "I'm Marlene Damgaard. Have you made up your minds yet?"

"Thank you very much, I'm Nina, this is my enchanting, charming, blindingly beautiful wife Jeanette. And yes, we have," the first of the brides said as she shook hands with the owner of the salad bar. The flowery language earned her an embarrassed snicker and a little nudge under the table from her wife.

The two women in the white tuxedos were both in their mid- to late twenties. Both brown-eyed brunettes, one had shorter hair and the other's was a little longer, but there was only an inch in it. One had freckles and the other had dimples; one had highly kissable lips and the other had round, well-shaped eyes; one had a pierced eyebrow and the other had a small tattoo of a butterfly on her wrist, so it all evened out in the end - and Marlene thought they were a fantastic couple.

"We would like two Salad Olympia with naan bread and two glasses of blood orange juice, please," Nina said and took her wife's hand.

"Blood orange, Salad Olympia, naan bread, okay... Uh, the Olympia... you want to hold the garlic, right?" Marlene said and winked saucily.

"That would probably be best!" -- "Uh-huh!" Jeanette and Nina said as one.

"I had a hunch you'd say that," Marlene said and drew a fat box, an arrow and 'no garlic' around the order.



Next to her, Anita and Karen hurried back behind the counter to begin making the meals, each holding a full page of orders.

Anita couldn't actually help Karen create the salads because she didn't have the proper permits that proved she had attended and passed the compulsory courses for safe, hygienic handling of food, but she could find the containers and prepare them. After Karen had pinned their orders to the top of the counter, Anita stared with wide eyes at the many ingredients she needed to find, but went to work getting them as quickly as she could.

Karen worked fast and efficiently and soon had the first salads ready - a cucumber special, and a cantaloupe and gorgonzola cheese mix on a ciabatta bun. "For the parents," she said and shoved the plastic trays towards Anita who equally quickly scooped them up and brought them down to the table.

By the time Anita got back behind the counter, Karen had the next two salads ready, and she had a look on her face that said: 'Will you get a move on?'

Anita gulped and took the next trays, already dreading how her back and feet would feel after the evening was done.

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At half past seven, Karen and Marlene had made more than forty salads of all variants, and the large plastic can they used for organic waste - the peels and various other leftovers from the pressed fruits - had been filled beyond capacity.

Marlene noticed as she wanted to throw out two spent pineapples and a handful of orange peels, but she didn't have time to go out back to empty the can so she simply took a new bag and stuffed the items down into it.

"Hey, hon? Anita, how are you holding up?" Marlene said and dunked a filter-scooper into a freshly-made glass of pineapple juice to fish up a stray fiber.

"Oh, I'm... I'm... just... a little tired," Anita said, leaning against the counter while she waited for the next orders to be completed.

"Yeah, I'll bet. You're probably not used to being up and about all day, huh?"

"Ah, that would be a 'no'."

Having scooped up the fiber, Marlene rinsed the filter-scooper in hot water from the faucet and hung it on a nail to drip off. "According to the plan, they'll break out the festive songs in a little while. Should give us a breather. The orders are letting up, too. You only have, uh, uh... uh, four salads and three juices left to go. Here's the first order, it's for table three," she continued and pushed a tray with a carrot-corn-zucchini-chopped walnuts mix towards her old friend.

"Okay," Anita said and left to carry out the assignment.

When she came back, she bumped shoulders with Marlene and leaned in to whisper in her ear: "Check out the newlyweds. That's just too cute... and nobody's batting an eyelid at it. Isn't that wonderful?"

Wiping her hands on a towel, Marlene looked up from creating a pesto-spicy humus-black olives-feta cheese salad to see Jeanette and Nina with their heads together, sharing a string of loving nibbles and kisses. From the dreamy looks on their faces, it was clear to see that their world didn't stretch beyond the soft lips of their new wife.

"Yeah... that's so great, isn't it? Man, it wasn't like that back in the old days," Marlene said and went back to the salad.

"No. Back then, we didn't even dare to hold hands in the bus."

"Tell me about it. I'm glad to see that things have improved. It's not perfect yet, but we're getting there."

"We definitely are," Anita said. She opened her mouth to add to her comment but was interrupted by Jeanette's father who tapped on his glass and stood up.

As the man went into a witty toast, Marlene finished making the salad and pushed the tray over to Anita. Before she started the next one, she took a few moments to look at Jeanette and Nina who were already blushing from hearing the deliberately embarrassing things and events included in the speech. Reluctantly pulling her eyes away from the two brunettes, Marlene found Anita as she was serving the salad, and wondered for the umpteenth time what it would take for them to get back to what they once had.

*'Or perhaps we're past that...? I mean, we haven't seen each other for so long... I hope we're not, though. The spark is definitely there... for me at least. Just being near her these past few days has... man, I don't even know how to describe it. The weekend flings are fun, but perhaps I'm ready for something more? Or perhaps I'm just ready to give Anita's awfully sexy thighs a buncha hickies, I dunno...'*

"Boss? Boss?" Karen said, tapping Marlene's shoulder rather insistently.

"Huh? What is it, Karen?"

Karen pointed at the tray with the salad Marlene had been making while she had been preoccupied with her daydream. "You know, I don't think the fork actually needs to be \*in\* the salad..."

Marlene grunted and looked down - sure enough, she had put a little plastic fork into the salad and covered it with a decent-sized squirt of Mediterranean seasoning sauce. "Uh-huh. Okay." - *sigh* - "Thanks, Karen," she said and dug into the salad to fish out the foreign object.

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As tradition dictated, the festive songs were distributed after the toasts, and soon, the wedding party broke out in cheerful and slightly off-key singing. Karen loved to sing so she took one of the sheets with the lyrics and joined the others, belting out the first of many songs at the top of her lungs.

Marlene was no fan of community singing so she stepped outside to cool off. Even though the sun would still be in the sky for a few more hours before it would inevitably go below the five- and six-story buildings on the Avenue, the leading edge of the breeze that always ran through the funnel created by the tall structures was chilly as it invariably was in the evenings, even in mid-July. The massive amounts of pavement around the shop kept the air warm, but the breeze made it difficult to exploit it.

The people who were walking past - mostly locals as the cruise liners typically offered onboard entertainment at eight PM that the tourists didn't want to miss - didn't take much notice of the singing, but one or two stopped and tried to gawk at the shop, no doubt hoping to see a celebrity.

A loud cheer behind her made Marlene look back at the shop to see if she was needed, but it had only been a punch line in one of the songs. Grunting, she turned back to observe the people walking past.

A couple of minutes later, Anita came out to stand next to her old lover. "Wow, they're loud," she said and rubbed her ears.

"Yeah, no shit."

"Karen is singing to her heart's delight. She's a great kid. How did you come into contact with her?"

"Eh, I put an ad in one of the free newspapers that are distributed at the business schools. I had a couple of applicants, but she was the one I clicked with the best."

"Oh," Anita said and shuffled around on the spot.

When Anita didn't seem to want to go on, Marlene walked over to her and stood so close the tall woman was forced to look at her. "And no," she said emphatically, "not like that. One, she's straighter than a straight thing, two, she's got a great boyfriend, and three, she's seventeen years my junior. That would be a major case of cradle snatching, don't you think?"

Scratching her eyebrow, Anita looked down at her blonde companion and offered her a little shrug. "Sure, but... you never know when the sparks will fly. Right?"

"Right," Marlene said with a laugh, leaning in to bump shoulders with her old friend.

Another couple of minutes went by before there was a new lull in the singing, but similarly to the first time, it was merely a punch line.

"Yikes, how long is that song, anyhow?" Marlene said and let out a sigh.

"Long. There were several pages to go when I went out here."

"Huh. I think a lot of the wedding traditions are great, but the singing... no thanks. Singing and Marlene should never be in the same sentence."

Anita suddenly remembered something from their common past that would have been the perfect anecdote for the topic if she'd had the nerve to mention it. Turning around to face Marlene, she opened her mouth but promptly closed it again. Then she opened her mouth - and closed it again. Grunting, she turned away for good and settled for studying some of the people who were walking past.

Marlene couldn't hold back a cheeky "Pfff!" when she noticed Anita's desperate attempts at keeping mum on the old story. Laughing, she took a long step to get over to the tall woman and wrapped a strong arm around her apron-clad waist once she was close enough. "You can say it. You can say I Will Survive, vodka and Club Bearded Clam, Anita. I'm okay with it... now. Back then... less so."

"Oh, I didn't want to make you embarrassed," Anita said and ducked her head between her shoulders.

"Nah, it doesn't embarrass me anymore. You know, the simple fact that we laugh at those situations sort of take away the pain and humiliation. D'ya remember what happened?" Marlene said and gave Anita's waist a squeeze.

"Oh, I remember..."

"Yeah. Singing I Will Survive is bad enough, singing I Will Survive loaded with licorice-flavored vodka shots and not noticing your jeans slipping down before you land face-first on top of the table you were dancing on... now that's mondo-bad. Jesus, that was awkward!" Marlene said and let out a loud belly laugh. "But you were there to help me up and pull up my pants!"

Anita let out an embarrassed snicker and pulled Marlene into a sideways hug. "Yeah... of course, if it had happened today, you would have been immortalized on Facebook two minutes later."

"Ugh, yeah," Marlene said and shook her head. "I'm glad I got all my crap out of the way before the social media came along. I don't know how the kids today can-"

A wild cheer and loud applause from the store made Marlene and Anita look over their shoulders - just then, Jeanette and Nina stood up and gave each other a big kiss on the lips that earned them another round of applause.

"Looks like we should get back to work. Hey, Anita...?" Marlene said and briefly touched the tall woman's elbow.

"Yeah?"

"Do you have any plans for later on? I mean, I'd love to come over to your new pad and talk."

"Oh, I..." Anita said and bared her teeth in a little grimace. "Would you mind if I came over to your place instead? I've only had time to empty out one of the packing cases. It's still kinda messy, so..."

Marlene's face lit up like a little sun and she reached out to poke Anita in the stomach. "You betcha! Hey, I have the greatest idea... we could go home and flake out... put our feet up... fluffy bathrobes and stuff. Wouldn't that be cool? We could have some wine and look at the stars and stuff... how about that?"

"Well-"

"Or we could, I dunno... look at each other?" Marlene added cheekily.

Anita chuckled and waved her hand in jest. "One thing at a time, Marlene. One thing at a time."

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A quarter past nine, the post-ceremonial dinner was slowly winding down, and Jeanette and Nina made their way around the tables to thank all their guests; hugging, slapping high-fives, thumping shoulders or simply shaking hands. When it was Marlene's, Anita's and Karen's turn, they each got a hug and a kiss on the cheek from both newlyweds for their services.

"Thank you so much for coming to our rescue," Jeanette said as she pulled back from hugging Marlene. "We've had a wonderful evening here. I'm definitely going to tell all our friends and co-workers about you. Oh, you made the best salads I've ever had!" she said, leaning in to kiss her host on both cheeks.

Marlene grinned and stroked Jeanette's arm. "And we've had a fun time, too. You were fantastic guests. I think my associates feel the same, right?"

Karen nodded enthusiastically, but Anita was unable to answer. She was biting her lips to stop herself from crying like a baby, and her expressive eyebrows proved how hard she had to work at it by wiggling up, down, left and right. "Uh-huh!" she eventually squeaked.

Nina laughed out loud and pulled Anita into a strong hug. "Maybe it's your wedding next?" she said, holding her hands on Anita's arms.

"Oh, now she's really gonna bawl!" Marlene said and nudged Anita in the side.

Nina grinned at the undeniable truth of that statement and pulled back from the silent - but blubbering - Anita. "Well, that's it for us. Like my wife said, we've had a fab time here. We'll definitely be back," she said and put out her hand to say goodbye.

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The frenzied assault of flashes the newlyweds had experienced when they came to the Juice-n-More was nothing compared to the one they got when they left. To give them a proper, traditional send-off, the wedding guests formed two lines out of the shop and showered Jeanette and Nina with Hurrahs, good wishes and plenty of flashes from their cameras on their way to the waiting rented limo.

As the stretch-limo drove off, Anita couldn't hold it back any longer and wrapped her hands around Marlene's left arm. A split second later, she howled out loud and dove down to bury her head in the nook of her shorter friend's shoulder.

"There, there, hon," Marlene said and patted Anita's back. "Everything's gonna be fine... fine for you, fine for me and especially fine for Jeanette and Nina... mmmm... they might not get much sleep tonight, but they'll definitely be fine."

"Ohhhh!" Anita howled and tried to dig her head even further into Marlene's shoulder.

## **CHAPTER 5**

After closing the Juice-n-More, Anita wrung out the mop in the plastic wringer for the last time and left it to lean against the wall. Taking a step back, she cocked her head and looked at the shiny floor with a great degree of satisfaction. "And that's how you clean a tile floor," she said and put her hands on her hips.

"It looks fantastic. Thanks, hon," Marlene said from her position behind the counter. Turning back to her notepad that was completely covered in numbers and shorthand codes, she continued her calculations and came to the same end result as her first run-through. "Okay... those guys chowed down more than I thought they would. We should probably have asked for seven thousand five hundred or perhaps even eight thousand, but... eh. It's still all right. And besides, Jeanette and Nina said they'd tell the world about us, so... that's great PR, especially within our community."

"Very true," Anita said and tiptoed back to the office. Moving as quiet as a mouse, she depressed the door handle and peeked inside at the resting Karen. "She's still sleeping," she whispered as she ducked back out.

"Mmmm. She was really bombed out. All that singing, no doubt. I think I'll give her a couple of days off... she worked her butt off tonight," Marlene said and turned off the electrical master switch for the ovens. "Well, I guess I better wake her up so she can go home and get some proper sleep."

"Have you ever spent a night in the office?"

"Sure I have," Marlene said and moved over to the main refrigerators to turn the temperature slider down to the night setting. After she had done that, she briefly put her hand on the sides of the machine to check that the compressor changed speeds. "...but don't tell anyone 'cos it's a huge no-no. The fire inspectors would pin my ass to the wall if they knew."

"Oh? Well, that would be a crying shame," Anita mumbled, but Marlene had heard every word and responded to it by wiggling her eyebrows.

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Some time later, the taxi they had called for pulled over by the sidewalk on the busy boulevard at Marlene's apartment building on the corner of Trepkas Street and Pond Street. They had barely stepped out of the cab before they were greeted by the familiar sight of flashing blue lights that came from the other side and turned into the hospital's lot: an ambulance and a paramedic unit.

Because of the lateness of the hour, they had turned off their sirens but the lights created an eerie spectacle reflecting off the many shiny cars that pulled over to let them through.

As they watched the taxi drive away, Anita shivered and put her hands in her pockets. "Yikes, I'm beat... I can't remember the last time I was this tired."

"I'll bet you don't get this exhausted from translating books, huh?" Marlene said and inserted her key into the front door. "Well, come inside and we'll see what we can do about your tiredness... after you, my lady," she said and pushed the door open.

Nodding a thanks, Anita stepped inside the lobby, but as she looked up at the staircase, she sighed deeply and shook her head. "I'm too tired to walk up all those stairs. Would you mind carrying me?"

"Yes, I would," Marlene said and nudged herself against Anita's tall, sculpted figure. "And you know why?"

"No?"

" 'Cos I was about to ask if you would mind carrying me?"

"Oh. I guess that means that either we have to spend the night down here... and that could get pretty boring, or... or we have to climb all those stairs one more time," Anita said in a tired monotone.

"Tell you what we're gonna do," Marlene said and hooked her arm inside Anita's, "You and me are gonna climb that mountain together... yes we are. We're gonna take one step at a time until we reach the glorious, golden peak. Whaddaya say?"

Digesting Marlene's words, Anita narrowed her eyes down into blue slits and shot her companion a steely gaze. "Mmmm... was that a euphemism?"

"Would I do that?" Marlene said with the most angelic look she could muster. "Nooooo! I just meant that the first woman up in my apartment will get the hottest water in the shower. They turn the central heating down this time of night, remember?"

"Oh, I'm sure that's what you meant," Anita said as she began the long, arduous journey upstairs.

"It was!"

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*'Medium red or chilled white, hon?'* Marlene said from the kitchen.

Stretched out on the couch in the lounge wearing a fluffy, pale blue bathrobe and not much else, Anita muted the late news to think better, but her brain was so numb it didn't really work. "Uh... chilled white," she said after a delay, but Marlene had already chosen the bottle and was on her way into the lounge.

"That's what I thought you'd say so I just took it," Marlene said and used her elbow to turn off the lights in the kitchen. Like Anita, she was wearing a fluffy bathrobe, though hers was spring green.

"Mmmm," Anita said and looked back at the TV to put the sound back on. In the meantime, the weather report had come on, and Anita and Marlene kept quiet for the brief update - even if they were both looking at the female presenter rather than at the weather data.

When the inevitable ad break came, Anita turned off the TV and put the remote on the table. Sitting up straight to make room for Marlene, she patted the seat next to her with a warm smile.

"Anything in the news?" Marlene said and put the bottle of chilled white wine and two flutes down on a dish mat on the table before she climbed up next to her old friend.

"Just the usual. There's been another shooting incident in the gang war, a hurricane has struck the Caribbean, a minor earthquake was felt in Northern California... oh, and the Prime Minister has had to defend one of her cabinet ministers who's in trouble with Mister Taxman."

"So what else is new?" Marlene said and snuggled up next to her fluffy, freshly scrubbed and sweet-smelling friend. "Mmmm... go on, have some wine," she purred, reaching out to take the bottle.

After filling Anita's flute, Marlene poured some of the white wine into her own glass and held it up in a toast, but before she made it that far, the ceiling light shone in her eyes and made her squint. "Oh, it's far, far too bright in here," she said and put down the flute.



Quickly jumping off the couch, she padded on bare feet over to the slider and turned the lights down to the setting one click above 'barely there'. "Oh yeah. Darkness is good. Darkness is my friend. Darkness is where wondrous things happen to open-minded people... like the Cocktail Hour at The Mask. Ever visited The Mask on theme nights? It's-"

"No, I haven't... will you knock it off with the pseudo poetry and get back here?" Anita said, having turned around on the couch.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Marlene padded back to the couch and snuggled up next to her house guest. The tall woman's natural scent mixed with her borrowed deodorant and shampoo to create an atmosphere that made it utterly impossible for Marlene not to reach up and caress the black locks that were right there in front of her - so close that it would have been a crime if she hadn't run her fingers through them.

Anita responded to the gentle touch by sighing deeply, so deeply in fact that Marlene stopped what she was doing and put her hands in her lap with a disappointed look on her face. "I'm sorry," she whispered after a little while, briefly putting her hand across Anita's stomach.

"It's not that... not really," Anita whispered back, and suddenly, the mood between the two women changed to something far more intimate. "It's just that... it's different now that we're older."

"Why? What's so different about it? None of us are seeing anyone. We're not breaking any laws... Cheers, hon," Marlene said and took a sip of her wine.

Sighing again, Anita leaned back into Marlene's touch and took her strong hands in her own. "Cheers. Oh, we're... we're supposed to be mature and levelheaded. Less inclined to follow our lower instincts. We're supposed to be in happy, solid relationships by now... not jumping beds."

"We're not jumping beds!"

"Well, I am. It hasn't even been ten days since the last time I made love to Jul- ...to my ex. And now..."

Marlene chuckled and gave Anita's hands a little squeeze. "Hon, unless I'm grotesquely stupid when it comes to the intimate arts, holding hands isn't categorized as sex. Or maybe it is these days, I dunno... would explain a helluva lot."

"Oh, silly!"

"Who, me?" Marlene said and moved her hand up to place it across Anita's stomach.

Anita shook her head and let out a dark chuckle. After taking a sip of her wine and putting down

the flute, she looked down and let her hand rest on top of Marlene's. "Remember that you told me I should be more assertive?"

"Yeah?"

"Is this what you meant?" Pulling her bathrobe aside, Anita took Marlene's hand and placed it on her bare, smooth stomach.

Purring, Marlene sat up straight so she had better access. While she brushed her fingertips across Anita's skin, she leaned forward and placed a tiny kiss on the side of the dark-haired woman's neck. "Yes it was," she whispered, adding another little kiss for good measure. "Mmmm... are you sure? I don't want you to feel forced into anything you're not ready for."

Anita nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. I'm not ready for... actually... I don't \*want\* a new relationship right now. Not with anyone... not even with you."

"Oh... okay."

"But a little rebound sex has never hurt anyone."

"You go, grrrl!" Marlene said and dove in to nibble on Anita's neck.

"I want to make my own decisions now," Anita said and suddenly turned around. "And... and... I... I'd like to... I w- want to..."

Since they were now face to face, Marlene reached up and caressed Anita's smooth cheek. She gave her former lover a smoldering gaze with dark, hooded eyes that spelled out very clearly that whatever Anita wanted, Anita would get. "Mmmm? Go on," she husked, pleased to see and feel that her touch was responded to favorably.

"I want to take you... on the couch," Anita said and ducked her head. The moment she had uttered the provocative phrase, a deep blush crept up from her throat that soon swept over her chin, cheeks, nose, forehead and even out to her earlobes.

Marlene briefly looked at Anita with wide open eyes, but she was more than happy to comply with the request and leaned back against the armrest behind her. Sighing sensually, she loosened the belt on her spring green bathrobe and pulled the fluffy garment aside to reveal that she hadn't bothered to put on any underwear after her shower. While she waited for Anita to make the first move, she put her fingers on the lower part of her stomach and began to draw little, circular patterns.

Anita gulped audibly when she looked at the vast expanses of toned, tanned flesh before her. Her mind and her body wrestled for supremacy, but her body soon won out and blew away her indecisiveness with a powerful love bolt that shot through her and set her skin alight from her breasts to the hyper-sensitive flesh at her center.

Reaching up, she shed her own bathrobe and let the pleasantly cool air caress her heated being. Not wanting to appear like she didn't know what she was doing, she slid down towards Marlene and placed a careful kiss on the blonde's stomach below her navel.

The sweet contact made Marlene chuckle huskily and move her right leg up to lean on the top of the backrest to ease Anita's access - but that was for later.

Purring from sheer anticipation, Anita slid up her old lover's body, reacquainting herself with the many little details that she remembered surprisingly well, even fifteen years on. Marlene's body had gained a few new details in the intervening years, like a near-perfect set of abdominal muscles, but all in all, she looked like the image Anita had stored in her mind.

On her way up the delightfully smooth skin, Anita felt almost giddy at the prospects, and she suddenly wanted to see if one of Marlene's most sensitive spots was still working: the under- and outside of her left breast.

Moving there, she gripped Marlene gently around the upper waist and extended her tongue to let the hard muscle slide across the salty skin, adding just the right amount of pressure to the wonderfully soft tissue.

The results were immediate - Marlene let out a throaty "Oh, Gawd!" and twisted her torso to get her left side closer to Anita's probing tongue. When it wasn't enough, she reached up and grabbed the dark head to press it into her chest.

Anita did what she could to pleasure her lover by kissing the sensitive spot, stroking it with her tongue and even using her teeth for a little nibble or two. When she felt it had received enough love and attention for the time being, she left it behind - much to Marlene's vocal disappointment - and climbed further up the toned, trembling body underneath her.

With Anita putting her hands behind Marlene's strong shoulders and pulling herself up the rest of the way, the two women were finally face to face.

As their flushed, heated bodies touched all the way down, Marlene gazed deeply into Anita's pale blue eyes and thought the dark-haired woman had never looked better, sexier or simply more alluring.

Every fiber of Marlene's being cried out in wanton need, and she had to keep a firm leash on herself or else she would have taken the lead and devoured her old, new lover whole. "Baby... it's your game... do with me as you please," she husked, throwing back her head to expose her throat.

Anita gulped but dove down to nibble on the inviting pulse point on the side of Marlene's neck. "I'm not a..." - *nibble* - "top, but..." - *kiss, kiss* - "I want..." - *nibble, kiss* - "to... to... to..."

Hearing Anita's stuttering hesitation, Marlene decided to help her along and crossed her legs behind the taller woman's firm rear to press their bodies even closer together. With her hands roaming the silky smooth skin of the long torso on top of her, she threw her head back in ecstasy

and moaned a greedy "Oh, take me!" - though she added a cheesy grin and a little wink.

No further invitation was needed - Anita growled from somewhere deep in her throat and rushed in to claim Marlene's lips in a fiery, bruising kiss that allowed the beast inside her to finally break free from its chains.

Moaning her unbridled lust into Marlene's mouth, she pressed her aching center down onto the strong body beneath her and was thrilled to feel the body pressing back. When that wasn't enough to satisfy the urges that coursed through her system, she began to rock her abdomen back and forth in an attempt to generate some friction.

A whimpering grunt proved that Anita had trouble finding suitable relief, but Marlene came to her rescue and shifted a thigh to let it slip between Anita's legs.

At once, Anita let out a long groan and began to grind against the smooth thigh, adding more and more pressure until she was so far into her pleasure zone that she could hardly do anything but hang on and enjoy it.

"Oh God, you look so sexy," Marlene croaked, staring wide-eyed at the look of pure, unadulterated lust that played across Anita's face as she rode the thigh.

Flushed and radiant, Anita didn't want Marlene to feel left out, so she leaned down and reclaimed her lover's lips, kissing both of them senseless while her soaked center was given a hard workout against the muscular leg.

Marlene's skin was on fire from being kissed and from watching her old lover enjoying herself so thoroughly, but she wanted to join in on the fun and sought out Anita's hand that had hitherto been behind her shoulder. "Baby... please... I need you so much," she husked, guiding the hand downwards.

Together, they traveled down Marlene's body, past her erect nipples, flushed skin and toned abdominal muscles that stood out very clearly until they reached her closely cropped golden patch of hair and the top of her glistening center. Wasting no time, she took Anita's long digits and ran them up and down the slick folds until they were completely covered in her love juices - then she guided them inside her.

The surge of pleasure that swept over Marlene was so strong that she was forced to throw her head back and let out a husky, throaty groan that sounded like it came from her very core. Pressing her abdomen up towards the hand to send the fingers deeper inside her, she began to rock up and down to assist with the ancient rhythm.

Anita slowed down her own ride to focus on pleasuring Marlene, but the blonde's thigh came back up towards her, insistent she should continue. Happy to oblige, she let out a sensual sigh and resumed the cadence, though she needed to go a little slower to last longer - she had something special in mind.

Marlene's rocking breasts and pert nipples were too good to miss, so Anita leaned forward and began to tickle and tease the two peaks, earning herself an inarticulate groan that segued into a whimper. Her position was a bit awkward so she couldn't really reach all she wanted, but by extending her tongue and letting it run around and across the left pink tip, she was able to do plenty.

Before long, both women were breathing deeply and feeling their orgasms gradually build to a crescendo that grew stronger by the stroke. Anita left the pink nipple behind and concentrated on being near Marlene's face. They fondled, kissed and let their tongues dance; loving each other with gay abandon until they were both balancing on the precipice.

Anita's moans grew louder and stronger until she suddenly gasped and became rigid. She jerked her eyes open and looked directly into Marlene's green orbs at point blank range, a move that gave her the result she had longed for - a full-on, mutual orgasm.

Her fingers were instantly trapped between Marlene's powerful inner muscles as the blonde came hard with a ferocious groan that sent Anita crashing over the edge, bucking and grinding against her new, old lover.

Moaning into each other's mouths, both women rode the crest of the wave as long as it allowed them to, eventually settling down into each other's arms as the golden shroud of afterglow descended upon them like a warm blanket.

After a little while, Marlene had finally regained her breath, and she was able to lean her head to her left to give her lover a kiss on the lips. "Thank you so much, baby. H- how did you do that? I've n- never..." she croaked, relaxing her strong inner muscles to help Anita withdraw her fingers.

"Always wanted to... could never do it before..." Anita whispered back, snuggling down next to her lover. She drew a line with her soaked fingers up Marlene's stomach until she reached her breasts, especially the neglected right one.

"Well... if that's how you make love when you're tired, oh God, I need to be around when you're on top form!" Marlene said and immediately broke down in a sated, husky snicker.

"I'll put you on my speed dial."

Marlene snickered once more and pulled Anita close. "Huh. Maybe I just need to write down the details," she said, imperceptibly positioning herself in a way that would give Anita better access to her sensitive breasts.

When Anita's long fingers began to really play with Marlene's right nipple, the blonde felt a few tendrils of lust peek through her afterglow. A fox-like grin spread over her features as she reached up to put a loving kiss on Anita's luscious lips. "Hey..." she whispered, "careful with that... don't start if ya don't wanna finish."

"Who says I don't wanna finish?" Anita husked and leaned in to nibble on Marlene's ear.

"Uh-huh? Uhhhhh... may I offer a suggestion?"

"Sure," Anita said, taking a break from toying with the succulent earlobe.

"This time, I wanna take the lead..."

Anita pulled back a little and returned the fox-like grin that Marlene was still flashing her.

"Yeah? I'll think about it," she husked before diving down to claim the blonde's lips just as she broke out in a throaty snicker.

**THE END.**