

~ A Million Reasons ~

by Ali Vali

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If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed, please find more appropriate material.

Sit back and enjoy the story, any comments can be sent to me at terrali20@yahoo.com.

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Beth, Len, and Ken, you are all godsenders. I bow to your grammatical knowledge and for your very prompt turnaround.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the wonderful people who take the time to read these stories. Thank you for all the great notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

This is dedicated, as always, to the one woman who holds my heart. As in all things, you've taught me to enjoy life and to live it so no day is ever wasted. To me every second with you is a treasure, so I'm extremely lucky to be able to call you my Valentine.

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"I'm telling you, Wendy said it was a foolproof system. When have you known Wendy to lie?"

"Need I remind you about the foolproof plan to make a million with bamboo imports?"

"Sugar, you know what your problem is?"

The short blonde turned in her seat and looked at the woman sitting extremely close, considering they were flying coach, on the long flight from New Orleans to Las Vegas. "What's my problem?" She leaned further back in her seat, coming very close to disturbing the sleeping man in the window seat. "I'm just dying to know." The sarcasm was a clue that what her partner had just said hadn't been appreciated. "Because aside from you calling me sugar, I didn't think I had any glaring problems."

"Come on, honey, you know I tell you all these things to help you." Claire Smith leaned further into the aisle just in case Jolie Clement decided to take a swing at her. They had lived together for five years and every so often the feisty woman's temper got the better of her and she laid waste to everything in her path.

"I distinctly remember just telling you I'm dying to know, so spit it out already."

"Your problem is you don't know how to take a chance. Life is all about taking chances, gambling every so often, sugar...I mean, Jolie. If you don't, you just become stagnant, caught in a cycle of boredom."

"Uh huh," Jolie put her finger up, stopping any other wisdom ready to spout from her lover's mouth. "As I always say, darling, everyone is entitled to their opinion. It may be incredibly simplistic in nature and based on simplistic thinking, but you are entitled to it." The plane rocked a little as it hit some turbulence, making Jolie's knuckles turn white from gripping the armrest. It was pitch black outside the windows as they flew over some of the least populated areas in America, adding to the small blonde's fear. "Do you want to know what your problem is?"

Claire waved her hand and gave the smaller woman a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Please go on, you seem to be on a roll."

"You don't think taking our mortgage money for the next two months and gambling it away in Vegas is crazy? Which, by the way, makes me crazy by default since I'm sitting next to you on this death trap more than willing to watch you do it." The bumpiness came again making the blonde turn and face the seat in front of her. If the all too friendly stewardess announced the necessity to put her head down and start praying in case an emergency landing, she wanted to be ready. "Maybe if you had grown up with a little less you'd have a healthier respect for money and what you need to get it."

Next to her, Claire pantomimed the words coming out of Jolie's mouth having heard the lecture more than once. "Okay, I get it. You think this is crazy, but you just wait. When we get there and I start playing blackjack, and start making money hand over fist, you're going to wonder why we didn't do this sooner."

"Yes, I'm sure, next week when it's time to pay the house note, I'll be wiping my brow as we get to pay it off in full."

Claire laughed softly and patted the white knuckles close to her hand. "Actually we'll be doing that just as soon as the sports bar Wendy and I are going in on starts making money. Just think, soon I'll stop bitching about having to go to work since I'll be having so much fun at C&W's Sports Palace."

"Yeah, just think."

"Senator Vetter faxed this over about the Breaux Bill." The paper was handed over without the man looking up from the stack that was left. "He wanted your opinion on it and wanted me to remind you he still has a bit of campaign debt."

"Of course he did, Oscar. When have you ever talked to any politician without them bringing money into the conversation at some point? Call him back and tell him we'll send a big fat check if he goes to bat for us on this one."

Oscar Giovino looked up from his paperwork and laughed. "Isn't that a little like a bribe, Becker?"

"There's no such animal as a little like a bribe. It's sort of like being a little pregnant."

"So it isn't a bribe?"

"It's a bribe dressed up like a campaign contribution. You dress it up, take it dancing and at the end of the process, it lies down and does your bidding. Having the Breaux Bill pass would save us a fortune in equipment taxes so it's worth it to me to do business with Vetter. Other than that, I have no use for the man."

Becker Gaudet leaned back in the comfortable leather seat of the private jet, stretched out long legs and sighed. The pile in front of Oscar represented the additional hours of work necessary to prepare for the looming tax audit. Work and paying taxes wasn't something she minded, but when assholes like Dave Vetter got mixed up in her day it made her want to find a nice island to retire to and fish all day.

"Last I looked, you didn't have use for too many men," teased Oscar.

Becker laughed along with him but didn't open her eyes. "I don't see you going around chasing any, so why should I?"

She watched as the ice in the glass of vodka beside her jiggled a little from the turbulence they'd just hit. They were taking a little break for the weekend, before that dreaded April 15th deadline rolled around, in their favorite city outside New Orleans. While there were setbacks to being Becker Gaudet, there were also tremendous perks. With that thought, she closed her eyes and tried to get her shoulders to relax.

They had become good friends years before when the older man taught a gutsy teenager the ropes on an oilrig in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. It was the only job Becker could think to get without a college education, which would pay enough to keep the orphan off the streets. The nuns would only keep you until that magic eighteenth birthday. After that, it was off to join the world outside the tall gates of St. Genevieve's whether you were ready or not.

Twenty years later Oscar was still helping her make her way in business, now more in the capacity of keeping the hangers on away from his boss, and helping her run Gaudet Oil Tools. In all that time, the older man had become more of a father, best friend and confidant all rolled into one. In Becker's heart, he was part of the only family she had and one of the two people in her life who didn't want anything from her, other than to be her friend.

For Oscar, it was much the same story without the sad beginning. He'd grown up in the suburbs

with parents who loved him, but had never found the woman he wanted to share a life with. Now he was content to live and work with Becker, always feeling like he had a home and someone who cared about him.

Gaudet Oil Tools had started small, just the two of them manning everything from the phones to the packing and deliveries. Soon though, most major oil companies discovered the drill bits Becker designed and manufactured lasted longer and were about a third cheaper than their nearest competitor. That was in the beginning. Now the company employed close to two thousand people and had contracts worldwide. The kid, who had grown up with only dreams and aspirations of success, now had more of it than she knew what to do with.

"Nah, you're on the right path staying away from the likes of someone like me romantically."

The blue eyes opened, and with a slight twist of her head, Becker looked at her friend with a huge smile on her face. "What, you'd just try to get into my pants then I'd never hear from you?"

"Actually, that sounds more like you, smartass." Oscar stood and poured them some fresh drinks. If there was something Becker and he had in common, it was not finding true love. But then again, it wasn't like they were looking.

"I'm waiting for divine inspiration, old man, so leave me alone. When I fall, I want it to be a permanent condition."

"Then here's to divine inspiration and the perfect women it may conjure up," Oscar held up his glass as he said it.

"I'll drink to that, buddy."

"Why'd you have to pack so much? We're only going to be here until Monday." Claire stood close to the chute that was at the moment spitting out luggage from their flight.

"It's one bag, Claire, so calm down. Are you expected somewhere I don't know about?" The brown bag was easy to spot in a sea of black and Claire hurried to catch it before the conveyer belt carried it any further down the line.

"I'm just anxious to hit the tables is all. It is why we're here, after all." Outside she flagged a cab making Jolie run to keep up.

As soon as their bags were in the trunk and they were sitting in the back seat, the two women had to brace themselves to keep their heads from slamming into the front seat when the driver hit the brakes to avoid hitting a passing limo. The car had no markings on it and the windows were so dark it was impossible to tell who its passengers were. Jolie laughed at the string of Spanish obscenities, or what she assumed were obscenities, that came pouring out of the cabby's mouth.

After the added excitement, Jolie reached over and put her hand in Claire's. Since the Vegas airport was right next to the famous strip, she leaned back and looked at the mammoth structures on both sides of the boulevard. To Jolie each casino was like a city with thousands of employees keeping it running no matter the time. Her partner hadn't mentioned where they were staying, so she was surprised when about thirty minutes later they pulled into the plush Bellagio property.

Jolie walked to the ornate railing while Claire paid for the cab. She watched entranced as the fountains the hotel was known for put on a spectacular show to music from "Phantom of the Opera." She found the booming fountains and equally emotion packed music made goose bumps rise on her arms and she lifted her hands to smooth them down.

"Do you love that musical as much as I do?"

The voice was soft and somewhat soothing in nature, enough to tear Jolie's eyes away from the dancing water to see whom it belonged to. Standing close by, but a respectable distance away, was a tall figure cloaked in the shadows created by the trees that towered well over the front of the entrance.

"I've never actually seen it." The blonde went back to looking at the fountains since her fellow admirer had done the same. From the build up of the music she could tell it was coming to an end.

"You seem like someone who would appreciate a great love story no matter how sad the ending, I know I did."

Jolie's brow scrunched as if in confusion as to why the woman would say that, but she never took her eyes off the lights and water. The music was hypnotic and she was about to ask the woman about it when the last notes played and the lake the hotel was named for went once again silent and still. When she turned she found the space next to her equally so.

"You ready?" asked Claire from across the drive. One of the bellhops insisted on taking their bags which meant a trip to the room would be necessary, unless she could talk Jolie into going alone so she could head to the tables that much sooner.

"When does the fountain come on again?" Jolie asked the man in charge of valet parking.

"Every fifteen minutes until midnight, ma'am."

The blonde looked at her watch and made a quick calculation from Central Time. It was a little before four in the morning in Las Vegas.

"You do realize that midnight was over three hours ago."

"We heard you were coming into town, ma'am, and decided to give you a welcome only the Bellagio could deliver," teased the young man.

"Uh huh, next you'll be telling me where all the good slots are. Why the extra late show really?"

"One of the hotel's favorite guests flew in this morning and that particular one is their favorite. In Vegas speak that means the guest must be one serious whale to rate blowing up all that water."

"Wait, what's a whale?"

"I'm sorry. It's what the casinos call high rollers." He started for the door walking slowly enough for her to keep up. It wasn't often he got to enjoy a conversation with attractive guests since most people passed the bellhops without ever noticing them, much less talking to them. I'm glad you arrived in time to see it because the extra ones don't happen often. You lucked out by catching the redeye out here this morning. Tomorrow they start back up at around noon and the first one is one of my favorites if you have the time to come back out."

She looked at his nametag and saw that Joe was from New York. "Let me guess, "New York, New York?"

He tipped his hat and smiled. "I can't help it if it reminds me of home whenever I hear it. The fountain show they put together for it is one of the best though, and it's the safest bet in this town."

"I'll keep that in mind, Joe, thanks."

If the outside of the hotel was impressive, the inside was truly awesome. Jolie had to stop and look around in awe when the revolving doors let her into the lobby. While the detail of the architecture and detail in every aspect of the space was incredible, it was the massive collection of glass flowers hanging from the ceiling that captured her attention. A couple of other people coming in after her bumped into Jolie as she stood there and stared at the most colorful thing she'd ever seen.

"Why don't we move to the center of the lobby and you can enjoy Chihuly's flowers without getting run over." A woman, dressed in a conservative suit, took Jolie by the arm and walked her a little further into the space. "Now that we have you out of harms way, let me welcome you to the Bellagio. My name is Constance. Is there something I can get you?"

It was four in the morning and the lobby looked like it was noon from the people jammed in line trying to check in. Most of them had their backs to the front desk so they could admire the lobby, making Jolie feel less like clueless tourist for her own rubbernecking. The difference between them and her though, was that no one like Constance was standing next to them offering to get them anything.

"I'm sorry, do you work here?" It wouldn't be the first time Jolie was targeted by someone thinking she looked naive and ripe for the picking.

"No, don't be sorry, I should apologize." The attractive brunette held out her card with a smile. Jolie read that she worked for the hotel in casino services, whatever that might be, in a

supervisory capacity. "I do indeed work here and I'd like to know if there's anything I can get you."

"To the front of that line," answered Jolie in a joking way. From where she was standing, she could see the tense set of Claire's shoulders. They had taken the late flight thinking everything but the tables would be dead.

"That's being taken care of, ma'am, if you could just point out who you're traveling with, I'll handle everything."

She laughed thinking she was delirious from a lack of sleep. "Yeah, right."

"Yes, ma'am, that is right. Who is it you're with?" Constance stood there with the same smile on her face. This wasn't her usual job, but then every so often it was nice to come down and deal with the gambling novice. "The sooner you point her out, the sooner you'll be in your nice room."

"Claire Smith in the red shirt over there," Jolie pointed to her partner. The man standing a few feet behind Constance started walking as soon as she answered. He pulled Claire out of the line and pointed to a door Jolie had missed on the way in. The ornate glass and brass opening had the words "V.I.P. Check In" written above it. "Were we the millionth customers or something?" The treatment didn't make any sense.

"Or something. Did you have any questions?"

"You mentioned something about Chihuly's flowers?"

Constance escorted her in further into the room until they were standing directly at the center of the overhead artwork. "Dale Chihuly is the world renowned artist who created the pieces you were admiring. There are 2000 flowers in the display each varying in size, color and weight. Of all the things the hotel is known for, I think most people remember us most because of the Fiori de Como, and the fountains outside."

"Can you blame them? This thing is incredible."

"Indeed it is." Constance smiled at the man taking care of Claire as they passed by. She wondered if the two women had any idea just how lucky they had been so far before they ever stepped foot on the Bellagio's gaming floor.

"Why?"

The short question brought Constance's attention back to the blonde in her care. "I'm sorry, why what?"

The Chihuly flowers weren't the only extravagance the hotel lobby sported. From where Jolie was standing, she could see a little of the botanical gardens and the massive flower arrangements

scattered throughout the back of the check-in desk. Being a florist by trade, she had some idea how much time and money went into something few people would take notice of.

"Why spend so much on things that aren't essential to your business? The art, the flowers," she looked closer at the material the front desk was made of, "The marble. Does it make people gamble more?"

"I don't believe so, no, but when the hotel was built the owner treated each detail of the design like a woman he loved." The manager laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "Well that's my romantic notion anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"If you love someone, to me, you do everything in your power to make their world as beautiful as possible. To some, it's buying jewelry or perhaps giving flower, but they don't give them to make themselves feel better. They give them to see the smile their thoughtfulness brings the other person."

"That is a romantic notion, Constance. You're single aren't you?"

"That I am, Ms...?"

"I'm sorry, how rude of me. I'm Jolie Clement, but please call me Jolie. You did after all save us from the line from hell."

Constance nodded and waved her towards the gardens. "I may be single," there was a crew of gardeners setting up to start working on changing out the thousands of plants in preparation of the upcoming Sunday. "And I may work in a place where everything is pretty much staged and make believe, but I do know one thing for certain."

"What's that?" Jolie was amazed at the number of roses they had on hand in large buckets of water.

"There are still people in this world who go out of their way to do for others just because. Especially for the people they love."

"Most people, not to pop your bubble, give a little because they're planning to take much more." Claire walked up with a huge grin on her face before Jolie could go on. "All set?"

"They must know we're here to gamble, honey, because they sure have rolled out the red carpet. They must be afraid we'll go somewhere else."

Constance's assistant hid his smile behind his hand, but not well enough to keep Jolie from not seeing him. "I'm sure that's the reason," Jolie said with a bit of the same humor Constance's assistant had just displayed. "Did you get us a room?"

"Actually, the hotel upgraded you to a suite, Ms. Clement. Whenever you're ready, Mark will show you the way," answered Constance.

"Can I call you if I have any other questions?" Jolie held up the business card. "I enjoyed our short talk about the hotel and your ideas."

"Call anytime you like, Jolie, and please enjoy your stay." With a quick bow of her head, Constance headed back to the VIP Check In to the only set of elevators that accessed the penthouse suites. One more assignment and she could head home to her two cats.

The doors slid open to a wall of glass that highlighted the Vegas strip in stunning detail. This was more the level of what Constance did on a daily basis. The penthouse rooms, and the people who stayed in them at the casino's expense, were her responsibility to see to it that their every whim was catered to. The casino would do anything to keep this guest happy and strive to keep them coming back.

"Can't you ever arrive at a decent hour?" Her tone was teasing, and she smiled as she accepted the drink the woman by the fully stocked bar was holding out. "If I look like crap tomorrow from a lack of beauty sleep I know who I'm blaming."

"You? Not beautiful? There's no way in hell!" answered Becker. She took a seat on one of the sofas in the room and stretched out her feet. "Hell, Constance, you're the reason I keep coming back here whenever I get the chance. At least that's what I write on all those little cards asking me about my stay."

"You are so full of shit, Becker. When was the last time someone asked you to fill one of those out?" She sat close to the lounging woman taking a sip of the light amber liquid in her glass. Like her, Becker had a keen memory for people's preferences, remembering Constance's love of a good scotch.

"How have you been?" Becker leaned over and kissed the woman hello.

"Missing my favorite guest, aside from that, all right. I haven't seen you in awhile. Staying long?"

"I thought Herman Lansing from Ohio was your favorite guest?"

She pinched Becker's leg getting a good grip on the skin of her upper thigh, since she was just wearing a dress shirt and boxers. "You have Herman beat by a mile, honey, just don't tell him that. Are you at least here through the weekend?" The fingers let go and Constance rested her hand on the warm skin. "Maybe we could have dinner or something while you're here?"

"You have me until Monday so just call Oscar and tell him when you're available." Becker took a drink of vodka and rested her head back against the butter soft leather. "I just needed to unwind a

little over a few games of craps, so tell Marvin I expect to see him in the pit some time tomorrow. Right now, I just need to get some sleep."

"Private table?"

"Nah, craps is not a lot of fun when you play alone. Just make sure they raise the maximum bet limit for me and I'll happily play with the tourists."

"We actually have a group in from Texas putting together a high stakes game tomorrow night. I'm sure they have room for one more. Interested?"

"Set me up, baby. Guys in cowboy boots are always good for a game of craps. It's all the whooping and hollering they do that gets your blood pumping, well for bets anyway." Becker picked Constance's hand up and kissed the back of it. "Now if you'll excuse me, we both need a little beauty sleep."

The casino employee looked at Becker and sighed. Here was one of those rare people who had no idea just how attractive they were. The short dark hair that curled slightly at the ends, the blue eyes, strong jaw and tall well-toned body made you look, then look again. Then, when you were faced with the charming personality and giving nature, you wanted to devise some plan to win her heart. Constance was sure that the woman who managed that, would be a big winner since the casino manager was sure of how safe a bet Becker was.

"Some of us need less than others. Have a good sleep, my friend, and I'll be by tomorrow with the details. Mark is here if you need anything before I get back."

"Thanks, Constance, and thank you for always taking such good care of me."

She nodded her head and smiled. Constance would never try and cross the line of their established relationship but wouldn't hesitate to accept if it was Becker making the first move. "Oh, before I forget. We took care of the other accommodations you asked about. Ms. Clement thought they were the millionth customers for rating such good service."

"And you killed that idea in her head? Shame on you."

"I did no such thing. Where do you know these people from?"

The deep laugh chased a shiver of delight down Constance's back. "I don't know them. Is Ms. Clement the blonde?"

"I spent all that time in that zoo for people you don't know? Becker, you should be thrilled I love you so much."

"It thrills me to no end, sweetheart. I just saw them when we came in. Thank you for cuing up the fountain for me by the way."

"And all the pretty water made you want to upgrade Ms. Clement and her companion?"

"Actually, Ms. Clement seemed to like it as much as I did and I thought I'd do something nice for her. I promise I'll make it up to you for doing what I'm sure is an excellent job." The tall charmer stood up and gave Constance a hand in getting to her feet. "It doesn't happen often, but I get the urge to practice random acts of kindness for people every once in awhile."

The memory of the diamond bracelet she had received on her birthday came to Constance's mind. "Uh huh, tell that bunch of bull to someone who doesn't know you. Being kind is your specialty, Ms. Gaudet."

Becker leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on Constance's lips. "Thank you for the very generous sentiment. Have a good night, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Las Vegas Boulevard was swarming with tourists by nine in the morning, while the more serious gamblers were just returning to their rooms for a few hours of sleep. On the strip, most of the older casinos had hawkers outside trying to entice people in with penny slots and a dollar hot breakfast. Becker watched the sea of humanity from the comfort of her room, sipping on a strong cup of coffee while she listened to her secretary run down all the calls she had received that morning.

"Tell the first three, there's no way in hell we're going that low on that much equipment, and tell Frank I'll be back on Monday to deal with his problem." The four-hour nap and hot shower she'd had left her energized enough to want to go out and do something. "I'll be here probably until this evening, but I'll have my phone with me if you need anything after that, Ann. Anything else pressing right now?"

"Put a dollar in a slot machine for me and see what happens."

Becker laughed before draining the cup in her hand. "And if I win a million dollar jackpot, then what?"

"Then I'll retire and leave your ass in the lurch." The teasing in Ann's voice more than came through making Becker chuckle.

"Then I'll have to lie to you if I win. Take it easy today and go home early. All the idiots calling today can wait a few days for answers."

"Thanks, and good luck, boss."

Oscar ended up sleeping a while longer, and when he finally emerged from his room, he found Becker lying down on the sofa reading a magazine, still wearing one of the hotel's rich bathrobes. While this was normal for the average person on vacation, Becker was more of an action type of person and it surprised him.

"Feeling okay?"

"I feel fine." She closed the book and sat up surprised to see it was turning dark outside already. "I just wanted to see what it was like to just unplug for a day and do nothing."

"And?" Oscar poured himself a coke and snagged a piece of fruit from the basket Constance had sent up.

"Remind me not to do that again anytime soon. I feel like a truck ran over me and backed up I'm so lethargic. Lazy isn't something I do well."

"Hell, Becker, I could've told you that. Why don't you get dressed and take a walk? After you walk the cobwebs out, we'll call Constance and take her out to eat."

Dressed as casually as Becker ever got, the tall business owner walked through the lobby headed in the direction of the casino. The tables were mostly full as were the slots and she laughed at a group of older ladies crammed around one of their friends playing one of the slots. They were all cheering her on as if the way the woman pulled the arm of the slot machine had something to do with the outcome. Becker kept walking when she reached the mall entrance to the casino shops thinking she would pick something up for Ann before the weekend got away from her. Her assistant never acted like she expected anything when Becker left town, but she loved opening the little gifts her boss thought to buy for her.

An hour later Becker walked out of Tiffany's with the saleswoman's promise the blue bag with the wrapped jewelry box inside would be delivered to her room as soon as possible. As she made her way back into the casino, Becker looked inside one of the exclusive shops that sold designer dresses and had to smile at the blonde holding one up in front of her. Not one of the saleswomen working was paying any attention to her and Becker could guess why. The faded jeans and equally faded denim jacket that weren't designers meant there was no way in the world the woman could afford the dress in her hand.

Impulsively she entered the boutique, waiving off the group of eager saleswomen and headed to the lonely shopper. "You have excellent taste, Miss."

Jolie looked into the mirror startled a little by the voice. She'd heard it only briefly the night before but it was hard to forget. "Thank you, but I'm more of a looker than a buyer. It's a beautiful dress but there's no way I'd spend this much on something like this. Not that I'd know how much it cost since nothing in here has a price tag on it."

"It's to keep you from running screaming for the door. I think it's their plan to have you fall in love with the clothes first, then shock you with the price." The sound of Jolie's laugh made Becker smile. "But if you were buying, I doubt Vera Wang would look better on anyone else."

"Do I know you?" There were a lot of customers who drifted in and out of her flower shop in New Orleans who just stopped in to browse or make a last minute order. She didn't have trouble

remembering the regulars but there were too many others to keep them all filed away, though she was certain she would have memorized the face that went with that voice.

"I don't believe so." When the blonde turned around Becker held her hand out. "But that's easily remedied don't you think? I'm Becker Gaudet."

"Jolie Clement," supplied Jolie as she took the woman's hand.

"That's a good old fashioned south Louisiana name, Ms. Clement. I apologize for interrupting you. I'll leave you to your shopping."

Carefully, as if not to wrinkle it, Jolie put the dress back on the hook and shook her head. "You're not interrupting me, please don't apologize." The night before came back to her again and Jolie came to the most likely conclusion. "Do you work for Constance?"

"I'm not with the casino, no. Just out buying a gift for someone."

"If it's coming from any of the places in here they're pretty lucky is my guess." Jolie smiled, enjoying the fact the woman had stopped to talk to her again.

The day had crawled by while Jolie walked around the city alone, doing some exploring in some of the closer places. Claire had gotten up early and started on her quest to win enough to buy her sports bar dream with her foolproof winning system for the blackjack tables. Surprisingly, her partner had given her back the mortgage money when she'd passed by to check on her. It seemed, at least for now, that her friend Wendy had been right and Claire was up about sixty thousand dollars.

The gambler had given back the seed money but balked at giving up anything else when Jolie suggested they bank some of the winnings. Claire was sure that with another ten hours of playing, she could afford to buy whatever she wanted with or without a partner. It was the last thing she'd told Jolie before the blonde left to go sightseeing.

"I hope my secretary feels that way." Becker held out her hand again and waited for Jolie to take it. "It was nice meeting you, Ms. Clement. Good luck while you're here."

"Thank you, I have a feeling we're going to need it."

"I've found that if you need it, Las Vegas has a way of providing it."

Jolie's brows scrunched in confusion but didn't ask what the woman meant. "Good luck to you as well." She took the hand being offered and watched hers get swallowed up as a result. "It was nice meeting you."

"Likewise." Becker turned and left, stopping to have a brief conversation with the saleswoman closest to the door. She never looked back inside the store as she walked back to the casino and so didn't see the way Jolie was looking at her as she felt around in her purse for Constance's card.

There was something about this tall stranger that intrigued her, and if there were someone in Las Vegas that might know something about her, it would be the supervisor of Casino Services.

"The player has nineteen," the dealer pointed to Claire's cards. "Do you want another card?"

Studying the dealer's cards, which now showed a total of thirteen, but one card was still facing the green felt, so Claire thought about her options. She was starting to attract a crowd who were lured in by the stack of chips she had in front of her. "I'll hold."

The dealer moved on to the next player who accepted a card, then the last man at the end who also held, making Claire sweat out the ten thousand dollar bet she had made. With a unique style, the dealer flipped her hidden card over and showed no emotion when she found the king of hearts. Sometimes it was nice when you didn't have any money at stake was her thought as she pushed another large stack of chips in front of the woman pumping her fists in the air.

"That's enough for me today, can you color me up?" requested Claire. She had picked up some new lingo while sitting at the table all day and was putting it to good use as she watched the dealer trade out the chips for some rarely used colored ones. It was a lot easier carrying them to the cashier's window than the pile she had accumulated. "Here you go, and I hope to see you a little later after I get some sleep."

The dealer held up a thousand dollar chip and nodded. "Thanks and good luck."

"Luck has little to do with it, sweetheart, it's all skill," bragged Claire as she slipped the four chips the dealer handed her in her front pocket.

The cockiness still hadn't died away by the time she reached the suite and found Jolie watching television. "I bet I can beat whatever you're watching." Claire rocked back and forth on her heels and tried her best to keep the words 'I told you so' from coming out of her mouth.

"You look too smug to have lost it all already, so what gives?" Jolie reclined further into the pile of pillows behind her and put her hands behind her back. She could hear the rattle of chips from Claire's pocket but decided to wait the woman out.

The firm mattress didn't make a sound as Claire placed her right knee at the foot of the bed and took her hand out of her pocket. The left one followed suit and soon she was kneeling between the blonde's naked legs. For as long as they had lived together Claire had loved coming home and finding Jolie lounging around in skimpy underwear. None of her other friends were this lucky and she was quick to remind them of the beautiful woman who shared her bed when ever the opportunity presented itself.

"Can you find something on that screen that's better than this?"

Jolie looked up at her and thought her lover was referring to herself. That she was for once

thinking about what they had as a couple instead of the next scheme to make it big. "I can honestly say there's nothing better than you, baby." She pulled Claire down to feel the weight of her on her skin and the touch of her lips on hers.

Before the passion could escalate any further, Claire rolled off her and shook her head. "Come on, honey, that's not why we're here." She reached into her pocket and pulled out the rewards for her long day of sitting in the casino. "I was talking about this."

The few chips that landed on her abdomen represented one hundred eighty four thousand dollars. Claire had managed to turn five thousand into a considerable nest egg for their future.

"You're quitting right?" Jolie couldn't take her eyes off the chips as she asked the question.

"We had a deal, Jolie, and I'm keeping my end of it."

Jolie couldn't believe when Claire just scooped up her winnings and headed for the bathroom. "Then give me half for safe keeping."

"The deal was we chance it for two days. Today is the first day, so by my calculations, leaves us with another twenty-four hours to go."

"You don't need all of it to keep gambling, Claire. Hell you started with five, so hand over half. Or is it I'm supposed to share the risk but not the winnings?" Jolie's voice was more than loud enough for Claire to hear through the closed door.

"See...this is what I was talking about on the plane. You don't ever see the big picture because you're dwelling on all the bad stuff that can happen. Every once in awhile let go of all your hang-ups and accept life isn't always bad. That it favors those who are brave enough to take chances." The winnings had emboldened Claire and she wasn't backing down. For once she felt like the one everyone envied and she wasn't giving it up without a fight. "You don't want to be a coward forever do you?"

"You think lady luck is going to give you another afternoon like today just because you're brave? Is that your theory?"

The door flew open and Claire decided to scream back. "Listen to yourself. For God's sake, can't you have faith in me this one time?"

The angry words caused Jolie take a step back. "You believe I don't have faith in you?"

"You promised me two days and that's what it'll take for me to believe you do."

"Fine, do what you want. We at least have our house money back so play with your winnings." She took another step back when Claire went to touch her. "I see that's what they are now, your winnings." The ice in Jolie's voice was as noticeable as the barriers that had gone up around her heart.

"Don't be like that, baby. I'm doing this for us - for our future."

"Our future revolves around us making decisions together, not you dictating what it's going to be." She turned and picked up her jeans, jamming her legs into them in an effort to escape.

"The guilt trip isn't going to work this time, Jolie."

The blonde grabbed her purse and started for the door. She didn't have a destination in mind, but didn't want to be in the room a minute longer. The only thing that slowed her down was Constance standing outside poised to knock.

"I'm sorry, bad time?" Constance's hand dropped to her side as she took a step back in case Jolie wanted to pass.

"Sorry, I just needed to get some air." Jolie ran her hand through her hair realizing she hadn't brushed it after her nap. "Can I talk you into joining me?"

"I'm still on the clock so to speak, which is why I'm here," Constance pointed to the box under her arm. "I come bearing gifts if you'll let me in for a minute."

From the bedroom, Claire watched as the woman from early that morning handed Jolie the large black box. It had some initial on it and was the size of something a jacket would come in. Maybe this was why Jolie wanted half the money. She'd spent her share already.

"What is it?" asked Jolie.

"I could tell you, but wouldn't it be more fun to just open it yourself and find out?"

Jolie recognized the logo on the box but couldn't imagine what could be inside since she was sure she couldn't afford a hanger, much less anything made of actual cloth, from the place. She took it and put it down on the bar so she could get the top off. Inside, wrapped in a swath of silk material instead of tissue, was the dress she'd admired, and sitting on top was a note.

Sometimes the buying is a lot better than the looking.

"Who sent this?" Despite knowing she couldn't accept the very generous gift, Jolie couldn't help but pull the dress out of the box.

"Someone who thought you might enjoy it, no strings attached."

"Constance, I keep telling you, there are always strings attached. Besides, I can't accept this. It's not appropriate."

"Do you remember the talk we had in the garden this morning?" Jolie nodded. "Then believe me, there are still people in the world who do it for the simple pleasure of seeing you smile, nothing

more."

"Only thing is, it's you who's getting to see me smile. Is that part of your job too?"

After dealing with the blowhards all day, Constance had to laugh at this woman's no bullshit approach. "I do declare, Miss Scarlet, that's the nicest way anyone has ever asked me if I offer pimping services."

"Do you?"

"My work for the casino and our more important guests touches on a lot of areas, but matters of the flesh as it were are not my forte, Ms. Clement. I assure you of that."

"I believe you, but I still can't accept this." As carefully as Jolie had lifted it out of the box, she gently put it back. Even though she was more partial to jeans and comfortable clothes, it didn't keep her from thinking about what it would feel like to put something like this on and be taken out on the town by someone who would treat her like a woman they desired, just because.

"I understand your feelings but if you can't accept it then you'll have to return it yourself. I'm sure the boutique will take care of it for you." Constance ran her fingers over the black fabric, lingering over the straps that made up the top. "Before you do that though, why not take a few hours to think about it? What's the harm in that?" The brunette put her arm around Jolie's shoulder and turned her away from the open door of the bedroom.

The doors and walls of the Bellagio were thick but not so thick she hadn't heard the argument going on when she arrived. It was a common theme with some who came to the city and went nuts under the neon and sound of the slot machines. "How about you go and comb your hair and splash some water on your face and we'll take that walk you talked about?"

"I thought that wasn't part of your job."

"If anyone asks, just tell them you're an heiress in from Louisiana to cover my butt. Now get moving before I put away my more genteel side and forget all about you," teased Constance.

When Jolie passed her without a word, Claire walked in and just stood near Constance as if trying to intimidate her. "I hear you did well today...at the tables anyway." The brunette couldn't resist the snipe.

"I see news travels fast." Claire put her hand on the box but didn't move to open it. "I plan to do even better tonight, so you'd better keep an eye on me and be nice. I might just be one of those important people you were talking about."

"While there's hardly anything that happens in this building I don't know about, you'll have to go some before you become a blip on my radar screen, Ms. Smith." Constance offered her a weak smile. "No offense of course. I do though on occasion give free advice. Could I give you some?"

"Sure, as long as it's free, because I'm finding nothing in this place is really free."

"The tables as they say turn on you eventually no matter how good you think your system is. Casinos like the Bellagio are built and maintained because in the end the odds always favor the house. If you've been lucky enough to have beaten those odds, then you should quit while you're ahead."

Claire laughed and clutched the chips in her pocket. "Isn't your job to make people want to spend money here? Maybe your boss needs to have a talk with you if you're trying to send me packing."

"In my job I meet and deal with people who come here and blow a couple of million dollars in a weekend just for fun. To you and me that sounds like a lot of money but to them, it's loose change." She put her hands up and shook her head. "I know that sounds farfetched but it's just the facts. When they lose, I don't worry about how it will affect them when I put them on their private planes back to their real lives. I don't know if I'll be able to say the same thing about Jolie. Just think about that."

"I would keep my advice to myself from now on or I really will call your boss. It's worth as much as you charge for it."

"Duly noted, Ms. Smith."

Claire picked up a corner of the gift box as if it were getting ready to come to life and bite her. "Who sent this, and why?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, but it was just someone who thought she would like it. According to Jolie it's going back so I wouldn't worry about it."

"Good," Claire pushed the box away from her and put her finger up. "Oh, one more thing."

"Yes?" Constance looked at her watch and wondered where Becker was at the moment and what misery she could rain down on her for this.

"Make sure they only serve me Chivas at the tables tonight. I don't want any of that cheap shit."

"Our high end tables only serve twenty-five-year-old Glenlivet but I'm sure we can scare up the cheaper brand for you. I can see if you haven't had it before where it would be an acquired taste." The thought of telling this bore what a bad idea it was to drink and seriously gamble died in Constance's head. After all, Claire wasn't interested in her advice. "Good luck tonight." When Jolie reappeared, Constance was more than ready to get some air herself.

"Mark, could you call Oscar and tell him I can't make it tonight," the request was whispered into the phone as Constance watched Jolie bend over to look at yet another flower arrangement.

"Are you sure you want me to do that? Becker is going to wonder what happened to you." He pulled the card of numbers he would need if the answer was still yes as he waited.

"I'm sure she will, but tell her I'll make it up to her tomorrow. I'm still babysitting her gift. If she needs to talk to me just give her my number. I'll stop by the table tonight to see how's she's doing. Make sure you mention that."

"Will do, boss, have fun."

"Beautiful aren't they?" The phone was put away and Constance stepped closer to Jolie. After several hours in the woman's company, she could see why Becker had spent close to twenty grand on the dress. "How would you like to have dinner with me?"

"I'm not really dressed for anything special."

"Let me rephrase. If I promise they won't shun you, would you like to have dinner with me?"

Jolie laughed and nodded. "That would be lovely, thank you. Don't you want to head home though? I'm sure it's been a long day for you."

"They're all long days, but lucky for me I love my job."

The lobby was starting to fill up again and most of the employees waved to Constance as they walked through. "It looks more like it's lucky for the casino that you love your job. I hope they pay you a lot."

"The money is nice but there are other things that keep me interested."

They walked along the major thoroughfare through the gaming area, smiling when they heard more than one yell from obvious winners. Constance pointed to her left and one of the many restaurants Bellagio was known for. The only problem Jolie could see was the mile long line to get into the place.

"Just two, Constance?" The oriental woman at the hostess counter asked.

"A booth if you have one, thanks."

"Is not having to wait in line one of the things that keep you interested?" No sooner had Constance asked for a booth than they were seated and being served hot tea.

"One of the things, but it's far down on the list." A waiter appeared with menus but didn't hand them over or interrupt. "Would you like to order something specific or are you up for a surprise? Noodles isn't our most expensive place but it's my favorite."

"What the hell, surprise me." Jolie smiled at the young man who walked away without saying a

word. "What's the top thing on your list of likes?"

Constance put her hands around her cup and paused before answering. "Can I wait and answer that?"

"You don't have to answer at all if you don't want."

"The thing I love most is better shown than explained, and I can't do that right this minute." Taking a gamble of her own, Constance asked the question that was going to be the answer to Jolie's question. Asking though would be going beyond what Becker had asked of her, so therein was the gamble. "Are you busy later?"

"I'm sure the pay per view can wait. What did you have in mind?"

"I want to show you what I love about this job. I want to show you the heart of the city."

"Sounds like an interesting proposition, sure."

"Any cards?" The dealer rested his hand in front of Claire's cards. The king of spades and the three of hearts was nothing to hold on so his other hand was on the boot.

"Hit me." Slowly Claire looked from the pile of neatly stacked chips equaling twenty thousand to the card he turned over. The ace of hearts brought her to fourteen, still not close to the twenty-one she needed. Wendy had lectured anything less than seventeen ask for another card.

With a flair that was starting to get on Claire's nerves, the dealer revealed another card. The queen of spades joined her mate a second later. "Player has twenty four." He flipped over the ace of diamonds to add to a ten before sliding all her chips toward him.

"Play again, ma'am?"

"Everyone has as couple of bad hands, no big deal." The pep talk was for her own benefit and the dealer didn't try to add anything.

"Ma'am?"

"Hold your water," she saw only one way to regain what she'd lost and get back on track. "Ask him for one hand at a hundred thousand."

The dealer looked to his pit boss. It was quiet enough for him not to have to repeat the question. The decision maker had heard her. With a nod, the chips were put into play. The dealer's hand showed a king and the hidden card, and Claire had another two tens.

"Any cards, ma'am?"

"I'll hold, thank you." The ball of fire in her stomach disappeared and Claire started planning her next hand and how much to bet.

The dealer flipped the card over showing the five of diamonds. He pulled another card from the boot, the card Claire would've gotten had she asked for one. An ace reignited the churning in her stomach. Another card flipped out and she leaned back to keep from throwing up when it was a three. The odds were he would bust before a two appeared.

"Two of diamonds, dealer has blackjack." Hours of luck were swept away without so much as an apology. "Thank you for playing."

"Don't thank me yet, I'll be right back."

The room was quiet when Claire went back up to the suite. She took it as sign her luck was changing since she could get in and out without an argument. She had to think a minute to remember the safe combination, punching in the numbers when it came to her. The earlier smile came back when she heard the lock mechanism release. Jolie would just have to understand.

The rest of the money was lost in the span of two deals, but Claire wasn't ready to give up and gladly signed her name to the casino credit slip. Jolie and Constance found her throwing up into one of the marble garbage cans close to the table as they made their way to the back. The earlier fight was forgotten when Jolie thought Claire was sick.

"Did you eat something that didn't agree with you?" It scared her when Claire broke into tears instead of answering. "What's wrong? Do you need a doctor?"

"Jolie, can I speak to you a minute?" Constance didn't want to interrupt, but a dark reality of gaming when you couldn't afford it was about to become an actuality for the blonde and her partner, and she wanted to warn Jolie.

"Can you call a doctor for me first?" She held Claire's head against her chest and ran her hand through her hair in comfort.

"Trust me. You'll want to hear this."

"No!" Claire found her voice when Jolie went to follow Constance. "Stay with me."

"I'll be right back, honey." She was torn but Constance looked serious about something.

When Constance finished it was Jolie who wanted to throw up. Claire had not only lost the day's winnings, their original five thousand, but an additional twenty they now owed the casino. The one thing Constance wanted her to know was they had twenty-four hours to pay it back since they had no established credit with Bellagio.

"Or what, they come and break our legs?"

"That was the old Vegas, sweetie. The new Vegas just gets their legal department to start stripping you of assets until you make good on the marker. Do you have the cash to cover this?" She looked to a pale Claire and Jolie didn't need to answer. "Because these guys don't really mess around with stuff like this."

"We have equity in the house but that's going to take a few weeks."

Constance sighed and closed her eyes for a second. If she didn't care for Claire before, the woman had hit a new low for causing the sick look on Jolie's face. "Let me think, because I can maybe buy you a few days." It was then the table in the craps area let out a simultaneous yell. Someone was having a streak of luck and the brunette could only guess who. The person lady luck seemed to favor more than anyone had the dice in her hand and she was just getting started. "Do you remember Becker?"

"I met someone with that name in the boutique today. Why?"

"Because it must have been memorable enough for her to buy you a really expensive non-refundable dress."

The blonde almost stumbled from relief until she reviewed and zeroed in on the word non-refundable. "I thought you said I could bring it back?"

"I said you could return it true, only to the buyer not the store. Becker knew the risks when she had me deliver it." She put her hands on Jolie's arms in an effort to get her to focus. "The dress is a moot point, Becker on the other hand isn't."

"Come on, Beck, we need the four, man," someone yelled in a Texan drawl.

"Okay, why would someone who doesn't know me buy me a really expensive gift?" Jolie was still standing only by sheer will power because she had a real need to lie down.

"I've know Becker Gaudet as long as I've been here and I really can't answer that. Today was really out of character for her."

"There must be something she wants." Jolie's eyes filled with tears and a few rolled slowly down her face. "No one does something like that for nothing."

"I realize you don't know me very well but you'll just have to believe me. She gave you the dress because you seemed to like it, nothing more. But because she did, if you ask for something more, then I also think she won't say no."

The yelling kicked up a notch with the dealer being the loudest voice. "Number four, we have a winner."

Jolie looked to Claire and something she'd said earlier came to mind. Only cowards didn't take

chances, was her taunt. "But only fools believe that enough to try," she whispered.

"What?" asked Constance.

"Nothing important," she took a deep breath and tried to picture the face in the boutique from earlier. "Claire, what do you want to do?"

"It's so unfair. There's no way he gets that two of diamonds without cheating. That game was rigged."

"Claire!" Jolie's voice rose enough to cut through the woman's ramblings.

"What?" Claire matched her tone. After the day she'd had the last thing she needed was her lover giving her shit.

"What do you want to do?" The blonde didn't come any closer and had her arms crossed over her chest. She wasn't angry, but the fear of losing a lot of what she'd worked for was making her head hurt. "Christ, Claire, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking of making a better life for us, but like always, I ended up fucking it up. If you're looking for answers right now I don't have any." Her head was down as she tried to make sense of what happened then looked up, almost eager to see Jolie's reaction to her suggestion. "Maybe I could try and win it back."

"The self pity act isn't working for you, so can it, and if you think I'm going into further debt by letting you piss away more money at the tables, then you're insane." A pale brow arched over a green eye as the only thing that could get them out of this came to mind. "If you put the whole collection on the net tonight with a time limit of twenty four hours, I think we'll have more than enough to dig out of this."

"You want me to sell my sports memorabilia collection? The collection I've been working on since I was fifteen and got my first job? Tell me you're not serious?"

Jolie walked up and put her hands on Claire's face so the brunette would have to look at her. "Then tell me, tell me exactly how we fix this? What you don't seem to understand is that not only are we out our five thousand dollars, half of which was mine - which is the part you seem to keep forgetting - but you put us in another twenty thousand deeper. You made all those decisions by yourself, Diamond Jim, so I'm asking you how you plan to fix it without a little sacrifice on your part?" Her hold tightened when Claire went to pull away. "Tell me."

"I don't know all right. There, are you happy? I don't know."

The small hands dropped in defeat and Jolie turned to face Constance. "What are our options here?"

"Come with me."

[Continued in Chapter 2](#)

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~ A Million Reasons ~

by Ali Vali

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

Chapter 2

"Okay, Becker, get 'em out of your system now. If you gotta throw sevens, now's the time." Dealers at both ends of the table worked feverishly to payout the bets from Becker's winning roll. This was one of the most coveted jobs in the casino and they talked and cheered almost as much as the players. After all, the better the players did, the bigger the tips.

Unlike Claire, Becker stood to one side with a bottle of water in her hand. Every so often the waitress would bring her a diet coke, since she never drank alcohol when she gambled. When the chips had been squared away, she rubbed her hands together in anticipation of rolling again. The button had been flipped to off for the moment making the dreaded seven, which when a number was established was craps, a good number to strive for.

"He's right, darlin', a seven would be mighty fine right about now," said the Texan opposite her as he put ten thousand on the pass line and smiled.

"Call me darlin' again, ugly, and I'm going to make you eat one of these," she teased pointing to the dice the handler pushed in front of her. Becker was paying attention to the game, but was also watching the drama unfolding a couple of yards away.

Glancing down for a minute, she placed her initial bet and then arranged the dice so the one was face up on each. Becker then stacked them before throwing them in a slight arc to the other side making sure they hit the side of the table. The red die rolled a couple of times before coming to a stop on the six and five.

"Eleven, winner." The dealers got to work again paying everyone with chips on the pass line. An eleven was just as good as seven on the come out roll and the players were exchanging high fives when Becker doubled their money.

The ritual was repeated again, and again she rolled an eleven. To the seasoned players it signaled a good streak and the bets started coming so fast the dealers were having trouble keeping up. In the frenzy to get the bets where they belonged, Becker relaxed and took some sips of water and looked at Constance. It wasn't uncommon for her to visit during a high stakes game, but it was strange for her to have an entourage.

"Are you letting it ride, Becker?" asked the dealer closest to her. She hadn't picked up her winnings, which left a substantial amount in play if she didn't collect the chips.

"Head in the game, Beck," added one of the players.

The guy had started conservative but was now betting big and was quick to give advice as if it were only his money at stake. Of all the people playing, the portly man was the only one not having fun. For Becker that was always a sign of someone with a lot to lose, and if that was true, he was the last person who should've been playing, but then people wanting the quick fix were what made Las Vegas thrive. If common sense prevailed, this would still be some little stop in the desert.

"Hey, Wilson, shut it before I do it for you," threatened the guy standing closest to the lecturer. His warning saved Becker the trouble. She rolled again without turning and stacking the dice.

"Two, craps." Snake eyes was a loser, and even though no one could really manipulate the dice to do their bidding, the people at the table thought she had thrown them for spite.

While the chips were being swept away and stacked, Constance came over and whispered something in Becker's ear. Blue eyes never left the blonde as Constance took a chance that potentially could cost her the job she loved.

Jolie reminded Becker of someone, the hair and what little she had seen of her eyes that early morning by the fountain had made her look twice. The coloring was similar but in the boutique earlier, it was Jolie's eyes that made her unique. To Becker they reminded her of a deep green lake with small golden fish swimming along the shore.

The ring the woman wore was a symbol she was with someone but her significant other had left her alone for the day in pursuit of other matters. The woman at the black jack table drinking scotch and losing wasn't important at the time, but now Becker remember who she was. Like her pal Wilson at the table, the woman played like she had something to lose, and when you chased luck, the lady became elusive. The sad look on her partner's face was what touched Becker. In the boutique, it had been Jolie's easy smile that made her act so impulsively and the look of sorrow was prompting her to do it again.

Five chips came off the tray in front of Becker no questions asked. Constance realized Becker's gesture wasn't a loan. It was a gift to make the smile reappear on Jolie's face.

"Chris, could you hand me Ms. Smith's slip please." Constance waited and looked up at the small

camera dome over her head. Her actions were being recorded but she was helping a friend and would let that stand as her excuse if her boss called.

She handed over four of the chips and the floor supervisor stamped it paid. "Thanks, and make a note to limit Ms. Smith's line of credit in the future to a couple hundred bucks. She played a lot today, but it was our money she was playing with."

"Sure thing, Constance, I'll take care of it."

She turned to Jolie and gave her the last chip. "It doesn't make you a winner, but it does square you."

The small plastic piece in her hand had \$5000 stamped at its center, and Jolie studied it before curling her fingers around it. "I don't understand, but thank you for asking her. Do you think when she's done we could sit with her and work out how we pay this back?"

"You don't have to work anything out, honey. This was a gift and please don't insult her by trying to convince her that's not how it was accepted. If you do, it's me who'll get the grief, and I'm already way out on the ledge here." Constance wasn't above using a little guilt if it brought the situation to a close everyone was happy with.

"No one just gives you this much money."

Constance put her hands up. "I know...I know, not without wanting something in return."

"It's true," she curled her fingers tighter around the chip when Claire stirred back to life and reached for it. "Back off, or I swear, I'll flatten you." The ruckus at the table meant Becker had again rolled something good.

"But we had a deal," insisted Claire.

"Yes we did and you lost everything, remember? Call me stupid but if you lose again I don't think this is going to happen."

Claire looked at their savior for the first time and it finally occurred to her to ask. "Who is that anyway?" She snapped her fingers and pointed accusingly at the blonde. "She sent the dress didn't she?"

"Yes," Jolie dragged out the word not liking where Claire was headed.

"Out making friends while I was busy were we?"

"Stop it, you know me better than that. I wasn't cruising women while you were playing. Get real."

"Then what is this, you coming to Vegas and finding a fairy godmother?"

"Ms. Smith, I'm going to have to ask you to keep your voice down or I'll have security remove you. Our other guests are trying to enjoy their evening." Constance had done all she could and was now ready to get away from the obnoxious egomaniac Jolie had come with.

"Try it," Claire stood her ground, the liquor fueling her bravado, "and I'll make you sorry."

"Is there a problem?" Jolie spun around at the question. There was something about Becker's voice that made her crave to hear it again. The myths about the sirens and their irresistible song made sense to her now. "Constance, is there a problem?" Becker asked again, when no one said anything.

"No problem, Ms. Gaudet, Constance was just escorting these folks back to the main floor. Weren't you, Constance?" asked Chris.

"Chris, if I wanted an answer out of you, I would've asked you," the tone was flat since Becker tried never to project anger if she could help it. "I've never know Constance to need assistance in answering one of my questions. She's more than capable I'm sure."

"My apologies, Ms. Gaudet."

Becker nodded and looked back at the three women. "Well?"

"Chris was right, we were just heading back, but since you're here I'm sure Jolie and Claire would like to thank you for your generosity."

"Thanks aren't necessary. We all get carried away at times when the thrill of the game gets in your blood. I'm just glad I could be of help."

Claire looked the tall woman over and didn't care for the way she was looking at her partner.

"Why did you buy my woman a dress?"

"Your woman?" The laugh that followed the question was full and deep. "I didn't realize you had a boutique here that sold beautiful blondes, Constance. Shame on you for not telling me."

"Becker, come on back," one of her gambling buddies yelled. "Stan sucks at rolling."

A big hand went up for them to be patient and go on without her. She wasn't finished with her conversation. "I bought a dress today because I thought the lady might like it. She acted as if she did when she was standing in the store admiring it. If you're lucky, which I see you haven't been at the tables, she'll wear it for you if you ask her to dinner. A wise woman once told me that beautiful women shouldn't be ignored or treated as property."

"You can take your advice and shove it up your ass, Becker, or whatever the hell your name is. Jolie is with me, and no pretty dress is going to change that."

"I'm sorry," Jolie interrupted. "Claire, zip it. Ms. Gaudet, thank you again for the dress and for the money you just gave us. I know it may not seem like a big deal to you but you really helped us out of a bind."

"Anytime." She completely ignored Claire and focused her eyes on Jolie. "I hope you enjoy the dress, but please accept my apologies if I overstepped myself in giving it to you. I certainly meant no disrespect."

"It was a surprise, but no, I'm not insulted. And if that's the way you insult people, you must certainly have a really good job," teased Jolie.

"For fuck sakes, Jolie, I'm standing right here," screamed Claire. "Why not ask her to take you up to her room?"

Becker put her hand up to stop whatever was going to come out of Jolie's mouth. It had been years since she'd wanted to hit someone as much as she wanted to smash Claire in the jaw. The first time she felt this kind of rage was right after she'd turned twelve and was walking home from school alone.

"Hey, kid," the older boy led a pack of his friends across the street from her and had been taunting her for blocks. "Hey, idiot, I'm talking to you." The other boys laughed encouraging Frankie further.

"I think she's kind of stupid, Frankie. Either that or she's deaf."

Becker gripped the tattered book bag on her shoulder and kept walking. She was tall for her age and teasing had become a way of life. It was always something, and other kids were quick to point out all her faults as they saw them. She attended Catholic school, but the uniforms she wore were second hand. Her shoes were always plain, and there was never money for extras like coke or candy. The Mother Superior of Saint Genevieve didn't believe in extras since she was in charge of so many children.

The little ones who looked up to Becker still had a chance at some couple coming and adopting them, but there were a few like her that were past the point where anyone but the nuns at St. Genevieve wanted them. For now Becker understood her place in the world and spent her days like a person condemned to jail for a crime. She counted the time she had left with women who had devoted themselves to God, but in reality didn't like children.

"I'm talking to you, stupid." Frankie and his gang had crossed the street as Becker thought about her fate. She didn't notice the sudden move until he shoved her in the shoulder making the bag fall to the ground ripping the strap off. "You the kid who don't got no parents?"

"And he's calling me stupid," Becker commented to no one as she bent to pick up her bag.

"What did you call me?" He kicked the bag again and the canvas started to soak up the water in the gutter where it had landed. A report she had been working on for days was now probably

ruined.

"I said you were stupid, but I was wrong."

The group laughed harder thinking she was resigning herself to the situation. "That's what I thought you said," Frankie shoved her again.

"Stupid doesn't begin to cover it and I really should've gone with asshole." When she was done, Becker cocked her fist back and let it go into Frankie's face. The blow caught him by surprise because of its power. When he doubled over, she went to the next closest one and let her frustrations out on the kid's eye. She felt the arms go around her when she went to hit the third idiot who wasn't brave enough to taunt alone.

"Whoa there, slugger." The voice was soft and full of compassion making Becker stop. She could hear her heart beating in her ears and her chest was working overtime trying to get her breathing to even out. "You boys go home before I call your mothers to come and get you for causing all this trouble."

Becker turned around to a face framed by the wimple the Carmelite nuns from the orphanage were known for. Only this time instead of an older woman ready to show her disapproval with a ruler that always materialized out of the robes, this was the face of a young woman with bright green eyes.

"I'm sorry, Sister, but they ruined my bag. All my work is in there."

"It's okay, sometimes I think the Lord wants us to stand up for ourselves don't you think?" The woman put her hand on Becker's cheek and the gesture almost made the child cry. While the nuns saw to their basic needs, affection wasn't seen as something necessary.

"Thanks for understanding. I guess I was lucky today you were out here and not Sister Gertrude."

"Don't worry, today will be our little secret." The woman smiled and went to the gutter to fish out Becker's bag. "I have another one of these in my room if you want to use it. This one might have seen the last of its service today. Come on. Let's go see if we can salvage anything in here."

"Are you staying? At St. Genevieve's I mean." Becker accepted the woman's hand and started off down the street with her headed for home.

"I'm sorry, I spent the day listening to Sister Gertrude tell me about all the children and I feel like we know each other already. I'm Sister Ruth and I asked to be placed at St. Genevieve."

"Sister Gertrude isn't like you..." Becker started but didn't know how to finish the sentence without getting into further trouble.

"You know what else I believe God understands?" Becker shook her head and waited for the

ruler to come out and wrap her hands hard. "That sometimes, even when you just meet someone, they are your friend, and friends don't tell on other friends, at least not where I come from. Becker, would you like to be my friend?"

"More than anything."

"Good. Will you promise me something else?"

Ernest and honest blue eyes never blinked as Becker looked up at her new friend. "Anything you want."

"What you did today, while it isn't something you should do often, wasn't wrong. Standing up for yourself and for others who can't fight for themselves is the sign of a true and good heart. What you have to learn is how to accomplish what you did today without your fists. The world is full of bullies and cowards who like to beat up on the weak, but the world is seriously lacking in those with good hearts." Ruth put her hand on Becker's cheek again and smiled. "Promise me you will always carry around that good heart and take up for those who can't or won't fight back."

"I promise, Sister Ruth, I won't let you down."

That started a friendship that carried Becker for the next six years. Sister Ruth's kind soul was the only thing she missed about St. Genevieve. Before her stood one of those bullies Sister Ruth taught her about and she was right, her fists weren't what were needed this time around.

"How about a bet?" suggested Becker. The lesson she had in mind wasn't for Claire, it was for Jolie, and it was to teach her how much Claire valued her.

"What kind of bet?" Claire put aside her anger and listened.

"I'll trade you that chip," she pointed to Jolie's closed hand, "for something bigger."

"What?" Just about anything was worth getting some money to start over. The night in Claire's opinion was just a temporary set back.

"A million dollars for a night with your wife."

"Are you insane?" The question came out of both Constance and Jolie's mouths simultaneously. It didn't surprise Becker that Claire stayed quiet.

"Let me finish." The tall entrepreneur put her hands up and smiled. "A million dollars for one night, but Ms. Clement has to agree."

"What, I don't have to agree?" Claire cut in.

"Tell me you don't agree and I'll drop it. The offers' good for the next ten seconds." A good thirty went by with no objections from Claire. "Then it's up to you, Ms. Clement."

"You're going to give me a million dollars to sleep with you?" She rolled the chip over in her hand to try and alleviate her nerves. "What were you saying about the things people do for no reason?" Jolie asked Constance.

"My deal is for the night, Ms. Clement. What we do with that night will be up to you." Becker looked back to the table and nodded when more than one of the guys waved her back. "Think about it, I'll be right over there."

When Becker retook her place and was passed the dice, she called Chris over. "Call upstairs for me."

"I can get you whatever you need, Becker."

"I need you to raise the limits for one roll, just the one, and then I'll be done for the night."

"How much?" Chris was cleared to go a couple of hundred thousand then it would have to go upstairs. He knew it and so did she.

"A million on the pass line."

He picked up the phone and waited for someone to answer. The conversation was brief before he started writing up a credit slip. "I know you're good for it, but..."

"It's a formality, I know," Becker finished for him. She signed on the line and put the piece of paper on the table. The money was now in play.

The others passed on placing any bets. Whatever had happened right before Becker took this kind of chance was due their respect and their quiet. A twelve, a three or two now wouldn't break her monetarily but it would certainly sting. She rubbed her hands together, found the one on the die and then the other. The right dice went on top of the left and she released a long breath before letting them fly.

Almost like they were watching a tennis match, everyone standing around the table watched the red squares as they took flight. They hit the side of the table and rolled half way back before coming to a stop.

"Seven, winner," the handler yelled.

"Bank it, Chris, and thanks guys." Becker tossed enough chips on the table to make up a sizable tip. "Now you both know I'm good for it and I'm not kidding," she told Claire and Jolie on the way out.

The blonde pocketed the chip in her hand and started for the elevator. Her partner followed silently not sure how to start the conversation they had to have. The one question in Claire's head was the one she had no answer for. Was one night something you could forget? Could she take

the money that would mean the fruition of every dream she could ever have, but live with the memory of where it came from, and what she had to sacrifice to get it?

"Can you believe her?" Jolie changed the combination on the safe so Claire couldn't be tempted again.

"Uh huh." The bed hardly bounced when Claire fell on it and looked up at the ceiling.

"You know, Claire, a bit of righteous indignation on my behalf wouldn't hurt you right about now as far as I'm concerned. I mean some woman just offered a million to bed me. Doesn't that bother you at all?"

"Of course it bothers me," Claire's voice faded away and she turned her head to look at Jolie.

"Oh why do I have the feeling there's a 'but' at the end of that? There is, isn't there?"

"I'm not going to win here, baby, so don't ask me that unless you want me to be honest."

Their relationship wasn't perfect but this was the first time a block of ice formed in Jolie's heart. "I want you to be honest."

"It's one night, honey. One. Just think what just one night gets us before you dismiss it. We get the bar, you a bigger place and a better house. Even with all that, we still have plenty left easy. All for one night."

Sheer will kept Jolie from folding herself into a ball. "And you can just forget it happened?"

"I love you, and nothing you do for both of us is going to change that."

"I see." Jolie ran her hands over her face before looking at the woman she thought she knew. "I'm going for a walk - don't follow me."

In the lobby, she found a house phone, and one call later got her into the hotel's private elevators. Becker was standing in the foyer of the room when the doors slid open. To her surprise, Jolie looked scared, with a good amount of disgust mixed in.

"A million for one night? Is that the deal?"

"I'm a business woman, Ms. Clement. I try to always be as direct and clear as possible." Her hands were behind her back and Becker never moved any closer. No matter how attractive she had found this woman, this business deal would be the only thing between them ever. "If you don't agree, then there are no hard feelings." She turned and started back to the windows thinking the brief encounter was over. The elevator doors sliding closed in a soft whisper was the confirmation.

"I looked around here today while I took in the sights. I must have seen a thousand women better

looking than me."

Jolie's voice had a husky hint to it, that made it sound soothing to Becker. "I'm sure if I went to a show, you're right, I'd find as perfect a woman as any plastic surgeon could conceive of." Below them, the fountains started their dance and Becker reached over and pressed a button. Music from Evita quietly infused the room with background music from the hidden speakers. Becker shrugged her shoulders and smiled when Jolie looked at her watch. Another unscheduled show because Becker wanted it.

"Then why not them?"

"Because I'm not interested in the thousand women you saw today, I'm interested in you."

They didn't turn and face each other but Jolie lifted her head and looked at Becker's face in the reflection of the glass. "Enough to pay a million dollars for? Trust me I'm not worth that."

"But I'm not anything special." The emphatic statement was yelled across the small neat room and was meant to hurt the woman who had said otherwise. "I don't matter to anyone. Even my parents didn't hang around to see what I turned out to be."

Ruth leaned against the door and let the emotions pour out of the young girl whom she'd come to love. She had answered her calling and devoted herself to God, but in Becker she'd found a way to make her service matter. For two years, she had endeavored to show the lonely girl that God had a plan for her, and the pain she'd endured fit into that. That was important, but so was showing her that someone cared that she existed, so Ruth became something Becker had never had. She became her friend and someone she could count on.

"I'm sure if it had been a multiple choice quiz, Beck, your parents wouldn't have gone with the car crash answer. Come here." Ruth opened her arms and waited. Sometimes the girl came right away and sometimes it took thirty minutes, but she always came. Today the restless beast in Becker wasn't in the mood to be soothed and she kept up her pacing.

Their talk had started because of a story Ruth had told her about her sister. They were close growing up and the nun was going to Chicago for a couple of weeks to visit and meet her new nephew. Becker just knew it was an excuse and Ruth wasn't telling her the truth. At the end of two weeks she'd be gone forever and that would be just one more person who had drifted in and out of her life, leaving only unfulfilled promises behind.

"Come here," Ruth requested again. Two years had brought about some changes in Becker's body. When they first met, and Ruth offered the comfort of a hug, she would run her fingers through the dark hair that rested on her shoulder. Now it was her head that rested on Becker's. "I'm coming back I promise."

"It's okay if you don't, and I'm sorry I yelled before. I didn't mean it." She squeezed Ruth a little tighter as if trying to memorize the feel of someone who was important to her. "You have your family and that's a lot more important than me."

"Is that what you think? That you aren't important to me? That you aren't worth another thought once I fly out of here?"

"I'm just someone you're in charge of taking care of, Sister Ruth. I know it's just a job."

Ruth leaned back and placed her hands on the young open face. "You aren't a job, and you're worth the world to me." Having Becker's attention, Ruth tried something that would forever cement their bond. "I want you to do something for me while I'm gone. Will you consider giving what I'm going to ask you a shot?"

"I'll try."

"I want you to think whatever you like while I'm gone, but when you see me back here giving you a hard time in two weeks, I don't want you to ever doubt your self-worth again. You may be different because you don't have a family, Becker, but it doesn't make you worthless. You are unique, so in my eyes, that makes you priceless."

Two weeks later Becker walked home from school so ready to prove Ruth wrong because, if Ruth was wrong, then it would be all right to just give up. It was the excuse she was looking for, to take the easy way the streets promised. Having the woman deceive her would be the perfect excuse to give into the temptations that enticed her every day as she walked through the French Quarter to and from school.

At the end of her walk, she entered the gates of St. Genevieve, and there was no Ruth to greet her, but there was a small gift on her bed with a note. Knowing you were right about something and finding it was true was more painful than Becker thought as she slumped down on the bed. It was how Ruth found her when she was done with her afternoon prayers.

"Didn't you want to open it?"

Becker's head snapped up at the sound of her voice and Ruth saw the tears the strong willed girl only shed when she was alone. "You came back."

"I promised you I would, and I did." The small cot creaked when Ruth took a seat next to her young charge. "And I believe you made me a promise as well. Always remember, Becker Gaudet, you are unique, so in my eyes, that makes you priceless. Because you are, I will be in your life watching you achieve great things as long as you want me in it."

With the relish of a child, Becker ripped open the box and found a coin. On one side, it had an imprint of the globe, and on the other one short sentence.

Vast but not impossible.

"My sister kept this for me. It belonged to our grandfather." Ruth held the coin up and studied the words again. "He always used to tell us that the world was a big and daunting place, but you

could find all her hidden treasures, if you were willing to do one thing."

Becker accepted this cherished gift back and closed her fingers around it. "What?"

"You must take the first step in that direction. Today you start walking and I can't wait to see where you end up."

"Ms. Clement, do you think in the whole of the world there is another person just like you?" Becker held her hand up to keep Jolie from answering. "Not just looks like you, but is just like you?"

"I doubt it."

"You're right, there isn't. In the whole of the world you are the only one just like you." Becker did turn away from the window and Jolie saw how blue her eyes looked in the pale light. "That makes you unique wouldn't you say?"

"I guess."

"Don't guess, be certain."

"Yes, it makes me unique." This wasn't what she expected when she requested to see Becker, but then this whole trip had been anything but expected.

"Then never question your worth. You are unique, Ms. Clement, so in my eyes, that makes you priceless." The silence between them after that was comfortable, and Becker went back to looking at the lights, feeling Jolie's eyes still on her. In her pocket, the comfort of Ruth's gift felt warm against her fingers. The coin was something she would never part with no matter how spectacular the prize.

It was getting late, or early, depending on how you looked at it. The sun would rise in about an hour and fatigue was setting in. "Could you give me thirty minutes?"

"Take your time, I'll be here."

"I just need to get my stuff then I'll be back." It was a promise, and with that, the die was cast. "Twenty-four hours from then right?"

"I don't expect anything more."

"You're going to do it?" Claire followed her into the bathroom and watched as Jolie threw her things into her cosmetics bag. "Did you get something in writing? I don't want her to renege if there's something she doesn't like."

"I'll try my best to fulfill her every whim." The comment was dripping with so much sarcasm Claire felt like wiping her face. Wisely, she refrained from any other questions along those lines.

"Are you sure about this? It isn't too late to back out."

"Tell me what you want and I'll do it." She looked up at Claire's reflection in the mirror. "Only be honest so there won't be regrets later."

"I want you to do it, but only if you want to. This is our chance, baby. We get it all if it works out."

"There's our answer then." She walked to the door to answer the knock. A porter smiled and took the small bag from her. "That too I guess," Jolie pointed to the box that contained Becker's gift. As soon as he had it in hand, they left without another word.

Two hours went by and the stillness of the room was still echoing with Jolie's last words. *That too I guess*. She was planning to wear the dress that rich bitch had bought her, then take it off for her like the thousands of other hookers in Vegas. The thought of it was making Claire sick but she had given her consent. No matter what the money brought them, those words would forever be a taint between them. Not being able to stand it, she left and started walking. The next twenty-four hours would be an eternity.

"Ms. Clement, welcome." Oscar stood where Becker had been earlier.

For a moment, Jolie thought she was in the wrong place but the man had addressed her by name. "Did she change her mind?"

"She's taking a nap actually. We aren't really used to keeping such late hours. I'm Oscar and I work for Becker." He waved them in. "I'll show you to your room then I'll be on my way." The size of the suite was impressive and Jolie's brows hiked when she took in the bedroom Oscar escorted her into. "The maid drew you a hot bath if you'd like to relax and turned down the bed if you want to get some sleep. Beck should be up in a couple of hours."

"Thank you."

"No problem. If you need anything just pick up the phone and someone will take care of it for you."

Jolie took a moment to just stand in the middle of the room and take some deep breaths. Once she was centered, she walked into the bathroom and smiled at the large tub full of bubbles. She undressed and sank down into the bubbles, and the hot water closing her eyes. The heat helped ease the pain she felt in her heart from how she and Claire had parted. After years of living with someone, it was a surprise to find that they could so callously throw away something that should have been sacrosanct.

It was the last thought she had before her head hit the pillow and sleep took away her worries of what was to come. The bath had also given her the opportunity to think about Becker and why she would waste some of their time together pampering Jolie alone. What seemed like only a few minutes later, she heard someone talking in the next room.

Jolie got dressed and walked out to the main room to join Becker. The woman's voice sounded a little louder as she spoke into the phone mike clipped to her head. There was a television showing ESPN softly on one wall and someone had delivered coffee and food. Becker smiled and pointed to the coffeepot when she noticed the blonde standing at the very cusp of the room.

"Tell him one more day, Oscar, but he won't get another cent until I talk to him, and if he thinks there'll be any more money after the results I've seen, then he must think I live with my thumb up my ass." She threw the mike on the sofa and turned to Jolie. "Sorry, I usually don't sound like some uneducated ass, but some people bring out the worst in me."

"I'm not that innocent, Becker." She poured a cup of coffee and added cream and sugar. In an unconscious gesture, she combed a strand of hair behind her ear as she stirred the liquid. "I can call you Becker can't I?"

"I think I would like that." Becker bypassed the fruit and reached for a cheese Danish. "What would you like to do today?"

Jolie laughed and watched the huge bite of pastry that went into Becker's mouth. How the woman kept so trim and fit if she ate like that was a mystery. "I think that's more a question I should be asking you, don't you think?"

"Can we make another deal right now?"

"Does it involve any more money?"

It was Becker's turn to laugh. "No, no more money, and it won't cost you anything else either. Can we agree that if I ask you something it's because I'm interested in what you'd like or what you're thinking?"

"I think we can do that." Another bite of pastry disappeared and the way Becker smiled made Jolie think it was really good. "Do you usually eat like someone's about to come around and take it out of your hand?" The unexpected blush that colored Becker's cheeks made the blonde want to take the statement back. Especially when Becker put the treat down and looked a little haunted.

"I'm sorry." It sounded more like Becker was apologizing to appease than because she knew what she had done wrong.

"No I'm sorry. Sometimes my mouth overrides my brain." The apology was heartfelt but the pastry was left untouched. Jolie decided to try something Becker probably wasn't expecting, if

not the day would be long and stilted. She stood up and walked around the coffee table to the sofa where Becker was sitting. "Open up," she ordered. When Becker did, the blonde shoved the rest of the Danish in her mouth. The action broke the ice between them and Becker was having a hard time chewing through her laughter. "Swallow and tell me what you want to do today?"

"Do you jitterbug?"

"As in dance?" Not being able to resist, Jolie brushed her fingertips along Becker's chin. "Crumbs," she offered in explanation. "I haven't in years, but yes I do."

"You know when I entered into this deal with you, I never realized what day it was." Pale brows scrunched together as if Jolie didn't understand what Becker had said. "I just thought I'd give you one more opportunity to back out and spend the day with Ms. Smith."

"Actually I'd rather not do that even if you want to back out, but I am curious as to why you would think I would."

"It might be Vegas and it might be Sunday, but it's Valentine's Day. I just thought you might not have realized it."

The reaction Jolie had gotten when she asked Becker about her eating habits was the same reaction the tall woman got when she mentioned the day set aside for lovers. There was no blush but the same look of sadness entered the green eyes and she was sorry she'd mentioned it.

"It's not really a special day for us no matter what we're doing. Claire and I aren't really romantic people."

"To each his own I guess, so how would you like to go to a party with me? I was going to skip it, but now that I have a date, it might be fun," teased Becker.

"Sounds like fun."

Becker reached for the phone, and when they entered the elevator, Jolie was surprised when they went up instead of down. On the roof, a helicopter was waiting for them and the pilot waved from the cockpit as one of the ground crew took care of the door. Once they were safely inside sitting in comfortable leather seats and the door slid closed, the cabin was so well insulated they could barely hear the roar of the prop.

"Are you sure jeans are fine?" Jolie asked for the fifth time.

"I'm sure jeans are fine," reassured Becker, making it sound like she would continue to do so no matter how many times the blonde asked.

"Then why aren't you wearing a pair?" It had only been two days since they'd met but Jolie had yet to see Becker in anything besides tailored slacks and equally good looking shirts. The tan pants and suede jacket was as casual as she'd seen the woman dress.

"Because I never wear jeans no matter what."

The wheels of the craft left the hotel roof and Jolie was temporarily distracted with looking out the window. In seconds, they were leaving the strip behind and flying over Lake Mead to wherever they were going.

"We're actually heading in the opposite direction but whenever I go up in this thing I love taking the long way around," explained Becker as they moved closer to one of the most inspirational spots in America, in her opinion. "Whenever I have a project going on and it seems like nothing is going right, like is happening right now, I think about this site."

Jolie looked down on an impressive view of the Hoover Dam. The pilot circled once to give them another look before heading west. "Why here?"

"In the middle of a depression President Hoover set out to build this place, and through American ingenuity and drive, they completed it in less than ten years. It makes me believe that nothing is impossible if you set your mind to it. Time and hard work can build miracles, if you apply yourself."

They could've been flying over the most beautiful sights in the world and Jolie still would've turned away from the window and looked at her hostess. Becker acted and spoke like no one she'd ever met. "You sound like a person who's done just that." She reached out and punched the tall woman lightly on the shoulder. "After all you can afford to pay a million dollars for a date, so I'm guessing time and hard work have made you very successful."

Becker laughed and tried to look humble. "Something like that. I actually have been very lucky and caught some breaks along the way. It's not all that hard to achieve success."

"Uh huh," Jolie wasn't fooled and Becker could hear it in her voice. "We'll get back to that but for now tell me why you don't wear jeans."

"Once upon a time I used to work on a rig out in the Gulf as a rough-neck. It was actually the first job I had after I finished high school, and it didn't exactly leave you spotless after a twelve-hour shift. The only thing that kept all that mud and other stuff coming out of the hole from getting on your skin was denim. After years of wearing that for some really long and dirty days, I started my own company and swore I'd never put on another pair." She picked at the crease of her pants and shrugged. The action was something she did when she was at a loss for words and Jolie was starting to pick up on that.

"Well work jeans and jeans are two different things and if we have time I might show you that. You bought me a beautiful dress, which is something I don't normally wear, so if you want, I'll return the favor and introduce you to the new world of denim."

"We'll see."

The helicopter raced toward the state line and soon the buildings of Los Angeles came into view. The pilot kept going though, until the Pacific waters were in sight, and they kept that course until the houses started to get further and further apart signaling they were leaving the urban sprawl for the big money homes. To own this much coastline in California put you in a league few would ever achieve.

"Do you ever pump Hugo gas?" Jolie nodded at the question. "The CEO of the company Huey and his wife Connie live just down the way there." The blonde looked to where Becker was pointing and a castle like home sat majestically on a hillside overlooking the blue water. "They met on Valentine's Day in high school eons ago, as she tells it, and they have celebrated the anniversary ever since. No matter what day of the week it falls on, they have a big party and hire a big band so they can jitterbug. I try to make it when I'm in town but it's been a few years. If it sounds too corny for you, we don't have to stay long."

"I forgot to ask you something?"

"Ask away, Ms. Clement."

"Actually I need to ask you two things." She looked back at the house that was getting closer and noticed there was more than one helicopter parked in the open land around the house. "First, will you please call me Jolie? If you don't, I won't dance with you. Which leads me to my original question, do you jitterbug, Becker?"

Memories of a rainy day spent with Ruth listening to the radio came to mind. Her mentor had endured her big feet until she got the steps down. That day when she twirled the young woman so devoted to God around the wimple had come off and it was the first time Becker had seen the beautiful blonde hair it hid. The sight had made her stop and stare until Ruth blushed from the scrutiny.

"Maybe I should ask about the girl who caused that look on your face?" Jolie finished with an unexpected question.

"Just thinking of the day I learned to dance is all, so yes I do know a few steps. I promise to try and stay off your feet."

She waited to see if there would be more, but Becker fell silent and stayed that way until they were seated in the jeep that had come to pick them up and bring them to the house. "And the girl?" Jolie tried again.

Before she answered, Becker took out the coin in her pocket. The words inscribed on it were getting worn from the touch of her fingers but they were still legible. "The girl, as you put it, taught me that nothing is impossible when it came to what I set as my goals." Jolie read the line and waited for Becker to finish. "The other thing she taught me was there are some things that are too vast to ever be possible no matter how much you might want them."

"Her loss for not giving you the chance."

The dark head shook as Becker accepted the coin back and put it in her pocket. "It was me who walked away before she comprised something she believed in deeply." There was a part of her heart that had held out hope she and Ruth would someday grow to be something more, but it was a child's dream that died in the face of reality. "I think that I would've always fallen short of her first choice."

Jolie reached for Becker's hand and sandwiched it between both of hers. "This may be a guess on my part, but you're a wonderful person with a good heart. If she didn't see that then she's a fool."

"I paid you to go out with me," Becker reminded her.

"True, but that doesn't make you a monster."

"Okay, let me put it this way, she was already married to someone else."

The hand was dropped instantly and Jolie's face became guarded. "So you make a habit of this do you?"

"Her name is Ruth and she's married to God." The look she was getting only intensified so Becker's words sped up. "She's a nun, Jolie, and she helped raise me." In as short an explanation as she could think to give, Becker gave her a history lesson on Becker Gaudet and her upbringing. "So you see, even though our ages really aren't that far apart, and no matter how wonderful I think I am, it's hard to compete with the perfect Guy." Becker got another shot to the shoulder for the corny ending, but Jolie's smile was back in place.

They mingled for the first hour and Becker introduced her to the people she knew, making Jolie feel like they really were out on a date. When the music started, she forgot about Claire and all the betrayal she'd woken up with, and followed Becker's lead on the dance floor. No matter how strange their arrangement, Jolie found that when Becker lowered her defenses and smiled, it was hard to resist having a good time.

They were waiting for the jeep to bring them to their ride back to Vegas when Connie and Huey came out to say goodbye. During the afternoon Jolie had learned that the nice older man had been instrumental in Becker getting her start. A start the tall woman paid back in full within a year with more than money. She was a loyal friend and came whenever Huey was having trouble with his health or his business.

"My dear, Huey and I wanted to come and tell you how pleased we were to meet you. I haven't seen Beck smile this much in forever." Connie pulled Jolie aside as their partners talked about business. "I hope you know you're invited back next year."

It wasn't in Jolie's heart to tell the woman the truth about the arrangement between them. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Hugo, I had a wonderful time."

"Please, it's Connie, and I meant what I said. Even if the workaholic can't make it, you are more than welcome. Before today I didn't even think she could dance and only came to humor me." They both looked to Becker who was at the moment hugging Huey goodbye. "She is remarkable isn't she?"

"I haven't known her for very long, but I have to agree."

The ride back to the Bellagio was made in the comfortable silence they seemed to enjoy together, and before Jolie was ready, they were back in Becker's suite. The breakfast food had long been cleared away and a beautiful bouquet of flowers now sat on the table.

"How did you know these were my favorite?" Jolie ran her finger along a line of deep violet in the mostly white Stargazer Lilly. They had talked a little about their jobs on the flight out and Becker had no trouble picturing Jolie bringing joy to people with flowers.

"I called Oscar when you were in the bathroom and he called your shop. A nice young woman who works for you was more than helpful." There was a stack of phone messages next to the arrangement but Becker had no desire to pick them up for the moment. "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

"I think we established I'm yours for the night."

"I think we established that we wouldn't do anything you're not comfortable with, so would you like to have dinner with me?"

Jolie forgot the flowers and walked to where Becker was standing. She slowly lifted her hands and placed them on the strong looking chest. "I would be honored to have dinner with you, if you ask me for something that you want."

"The dress," Becker's voice broke a little and she had to stop and clear her throat. "Would you wear the dress?"

"Meet you back out here in an hour?"

The dark head nodded and Jolie smiled a bit at the blush on the good-looking face. "Take all the time you need."

Jolie walked to the room she'd been given for the day and vowed to take just enough time to make herself presentable. Unless Becker changed dramatically in the next few hours, this experience wouldn't be the nightmare she had feared it would be.

They walked through the casino close together but not touching. A pair of sullen gray eyes followed their progression taking in the smile on Jolie's face. The blonde hair was pinned up and

the dress Becker had given her fit like it was made specifically for her. To anyone else watching they looked like a couple who had been together for years, but Claire knew better. Jolie looked like she had fallen into her role as a whore quite nicely.

At the entrance to the casino shops, they descended an escalator and were escorted to an area Becker had reserved for the night. Off to the side of the Prime restaurant was a balcony that overlooked the fountains the casino was famous for. The space was filled with flowers, and at the center, sat one table illuminated by candlelight. It was the perfect place to enjoy the free show that would be cued up every fifteen minutes.

"They're known for their steaks here but if you don't care for that, you can order what ever style of food you like and it won't be a problem," Becker explained as she pulled out her chair. Nearby a waiter popped open a bottle of champagne and poured two glasses.

The meal was as perfect as the setting and they sat and talked about a variety of things. On the way back to the room, Jolie took Becker's offered arm for the walk and she fell silent not sure about how this night would end. When the elevator door closed behind them, Becker turned on the stereo and put her hand out in invitation. Jolie accepted and they started to dance to the slow romantic music Becker had chosen.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Jolie, you can ask me anything."

"Why did you really do all of this?" Becker's hand felt hot and the material of her jacket felt soft against her cheek. "You had to realize I was satisfied with the money you gave us initially with no questions asked. All this was unnecessary."

"When I was twelve, I met a woman who was the first person in my life to love me, and the first person to notice I existed. Sister Ruth wasn't much older than I was really, but she was so much more than my caretaker and mentor, she was and still is the only family I have, aside from Oscar. The day we met, I was being bullied by a group of idiots who roamed the neighborhood looking for people weaker than themselves to harass."

Jolie reached up and let her hair down, shaking her head to loosen the blonde locks into falling around her shoulders. "You don't exactly strike me as someone I'd pick on."

"When Sister Ruth walked up I was actually holding my own and punching everyone I could reach. If you have any experience with nuns, you'd know it's big trouble to be doing that within eyesight of those black robes." Becker smiled when Jolie looked up at her and smiled. "I thought I was in for a knuckle rapping with the infamous ruler they all seem to carry, when instead, she explained that it was all right to take up for yourself if the situation called for it. In fact it was a sin to not fight for those who can't or won't fight for themselves."

"That sounds noble, but what does it have to do with me?"

Becker released Jolie's hand and ran her fingers along the blonde's cheek. "Sometimes it's the battles we don't acknowledge that are the hardest to fight."

The way the blue eyes took her in made Jolie want to cry. "What do you mean?"

"At first you reminded me of her, or at least what Ruth would have been like before she took her vows. Then I saw you again in that boutique and I saw you weren't like her at all. You're a beautiful woman who made vows of her own, and as much as I wanted to ignore it, I saw the ring on your finger." The fingers moved again down to Jolie's neck. "Then I met the woman you share your life with and decided to fight."

"Do I look like someone who needs defending?" There was no malice in her question but Jolie's smile faded some. She was tired of strong women who felt they knew what she needed better than she did.

"What you have with Claire is none of my business, Jolie, and today wasn't about trying to change that."

"Then what was it about?"

"I think the battle I wanted to fight was to do everything in my power to remind you that you are unique." Becker lowered her head and kissed her forehead. "It might have been wrong, but I wanted to show you just how unique you are and how beautiful you are because of it."

"But the money...I thought..."

"The money is still yours, but this is where our time together ends."

It was a gift, a way out without comprising anything, but Jolie didn't feel relief, just a little disappointed. "I know this is going to sound crazy, but you don't want me?"

Becker looked at her before lowering her head again. This time her lips pressed up against Jolie's with the serious intent of showing her just how much she was wanted. It made the blonde close her eyes and fall against the tall body as Becker's tongue asked for admittance that was readily granted. Maybe it was because it was someone new and the situation was a little unorthodox, but Jolie got caught up in the moment. She was left dazed when Becker pulled away and just held her.

"Not want you? You can't think that." She kissed the top of the blonde head and held Jolie a little longer. "I just want you to walk out of here gaining something and not feeling as if you've lost something no one can ever give you back." Long fingers tapped over her heart. "Something in here that no amount of money can replace." They shared one more short kiss before Becker did pull away completely. "Be well, Jolie, be happy, and thank you for the day."

The finality of it made Jolie notice the bags by the door. "You're leaving?"

"The room is yours as long as you need it, and Constance is around if you need anything and to get your bank information to make the transfer. I'm going back tonight so you won't have to worry about anything." She turned her back on the petite woman so she wouldn't see her eyes. "I hope things work out with Claire." For once Becker figured Ruth would forgive her the lie.

With that, a porter arrived when Becker called for the elevator and she was gone.

[Continued in Chapter 3](#)

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~ A Million Reasons ~

by Ali Vali

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Chapter 3

Jolie stayed long enough to change back into her jeans before heading down to see Constance so the ever-efficient woman could make some quick arrangements for her. Her second stop was to return to the room she was sharing with Claire. She wasn't surprised when her partner didn't put up a fight when she informed her she wanted to go home. Their flight was leaving in less than an hour thanks to the casino worker's maneuvering and for Jolie it couldn't be soon enough. They didn't exchange a word all through the flight and or during cab ride home.

Finally back in their kitchen, they looked at each other and Claire thought it was up to her to clear the air between them. "Look, it's done and we have to just forget it happened. I say we make a pact never to talk about it."

The look on Jolie's face was devoid of emotion. "I don't need a pact, since I have no intention of ever talking to you about it."

"If you need to talk about it I promise to listen, but I'd rather our friends not know what happened," continued Claire as if she had chosen to ignore what Jolie had said.

Jolie's laugh echoed in the open refrigerator when she reached in for a soft drink. "I see. It's all right to sell your wife as long as your buddies don't find out about it. How terribly butch of you, darling."

"You can be mad at me all you want, Jolie, but this was as much your idea as it was mine."

She released a sigh as she popped the can open and looked up at the woman she had shared five years of her life with. "You're right, and we should just do what you said and forget about it."

It was a promise they kept for a month. Their relationship was strained at first but with the passing days, it moved closer to what it had been in every area except the bedroom. As much as Claire wanted to push in that arena, she respected Jolie's need for space.

At the beginning of April, Claire left the site of the sports bar that was being renovated for an early May opening, to ask Jolie out to lunch. It was the blonde's birthday and with any luck today would be the beginning of getting back the old Jolie she'd lost on that ill-fated trip to Nevada.

The bell over the door of the blonde's flower shop jingled to announce Claire's arrival but there was no one behind the counter. With no one to stop her, Claire was able to walk into the back room to surprise Jolie. It was the far off look in the green eyes that set her off. The glazed look was not an uncommon sight around their house and Claire had gritted her teeth and taken it up to now, knowing what her wife was replaying in her head.

"Was she so fucking good that you can't forget?" A bucket of Stargazer Lilies hit the back wall when Claire pushed it off the table. "I want to know."

"Want to know what?" The glaze disappeared from Jolie's green eyes as she pinned Claire with an intense look.

"Tell me what happened that night? Tell me what she gave you that I obviously can't since you won't let me within ten feet of you?"

Jolie moved to the flowers on the floor and tried to salvage what she could of the delicate blooms. "I thought we had a deal that we weren't going to talk about it?"

"Forget the damn deal, I want to know."

The bucket was kicked away from Jolie again and the action made her stand and turn her anger on Claire. "Don't ever do that again." She wiped the water the second blow had sprayed her with off her face. "I don't give a damn what you want, Claire, I'm not going to talk to you about what happened with Becker so learn to live with it. It's done and it's over, so why dwell on it?"

"I don't want to fucking dwell on it, but I'm sick of walking into rooms to find you mooning over someone who used you and kicked you back to the curb."

Jolie opened her mouth to respond then closed it just as quick. "I won't get pulled into this conversation. What happened was mutually agree to by all of us, and we'll all have to live with it. That means all of us, Claire, so try and forget it happened, like you keep telling me to do."

"I need to know, and I need to know now, what happened that night."

"I need lots of things too, but I won't get them just by wishing, so forget it." She started throwing the ruined flowers away trying to put an end to their talk. "Like I said, why dwell on it?"

"Because we'll never get past this if you don't tell me."

"Therein lies the problem then doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Claire crossed her arms over her chest and tried to look intimidating.

"That I'm never going to feel comfortable telling you anything about that night because it has nothing to do with you and me."

"As part of this couple it's my right to know, so tell me. If you don't, I'll know that you have something to hide, and I'll have no reason to stay." She took a step closer and dropped her fists to her side. "If I always feel that way then how will we get past it?"

"If that's the way you feel then get out, because we'll never get past it. There's nothing I can tell you to make you feel good about yourself, you just have to trust me on this one." She started to clean up again until Claire's hand came around her bicep and the taller woman pulled her to her feet. Jolie had never feared her but there was something new in Claire's eyes that hadn't been there before. The gray orbs were colored with an anger born of jealousy but the blonde was far from scared. "I said get out, we're done here."

The jingle of the bell as Claire slammed through the door gave Jolie's tears permission to fall, and she cried for all the things that were missing in her life, and all the things she wanted to be different. Though she was upset, she managed to lock the front door and flip the open sign so she wouldn't have to deal with anyone else. In the middle of her break down, the phone rang and she let the machine answer it, glad her assistant was out for the day. She cried harder when she heard the voice on the other end of the line. The voice was a very real reminder of what had started the longing in her heart for things that she would never have.

"Jolie, sorry I missed you, but I'd appreciate a call back when you get this. I received an interesting phone call today and I thought I'd share it with you. Actually I got it yesterday and spent some time thinking about whether to call you or not, but mistake or no I think you'd want to know." Constance stood in her office and looked at the gardens outside her window. The receiver had been picked up about twenty times before she finally went through with the call. She almost passed out from relief when the machine picked up instead of the blonde. "Above all else, I hope you are doing well. Call me."

The red blinking light started as soon as Constance hung up and Jolie looked at it through her tears for an hour before she stood up and washed her face. It was still early but she finished locking up and headed home, intent on lying down and going to sleep after her emotionally exhausting afternoon. She did exactly that, not waking up until six the next morning. When she opened her eyes, Jolie instinctively knew that Claire hadn't come home, and after what had happened the day before, she wondered if she was ever coming home again. What surprised her

the most was how little that thought concerned her.

After a shower, she stopped at the coffee shop near her shop and bought herself a cheese Danish. It wasn't on her diet, but it didn't really matter to her today as she took a huge bite. "Happy belated birthday to me," she mumbled around a mouthful of treat. Another huge piece went into her mouth as she turned the corner. Jolie could now see why Becker ate the things in big bites. They were sinfully good. She almost choked on the third bite when in the pursuit of digging through her purse for her keys, she ran into a nun standing outside her shop. "I'm so sorry we," she mumbled around the pastry in her mouth.

"No need to apologize, dear, it's the robes. They freak people out when they aren't expecting us," teased the woman. "I'm beginning to think I need to take up eating those things," she pointed to the pastry in Jolie's hand and smiled. "No one I know seems to eat them in small bites."

Jolie almost choked she swallowed so quickly but she didn't want to be rude. "I'm sorry for running into you. Are you all right? Would you like to come in?"

They walked in together and Jolie walked around turning on lights, waving towards a seat near the counter. "You have a lovely shop, dear. I can tell by the plants in here, this is more than just a business to you."

"Thank you, Sister, I appreciate praise from what I'm guessing is another flower lover." She took a seat across the counter and rested her chin on her palm. "Are you sure you're all right? Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine, stop worrying. I was actually window shopping while I was waiting to see you."

Jolie nodded and smiled. "Is there something special you needed today?"

"Actually a mutual friend recommended you and I thought I'd stop by and talk to you about a project I'm working on."

"Mutual friend?"

"Constance said she called you yesterday but wasn't able to reach you. I guess I should ask before I go on and make a fool of myself by being in the wrong place. You are Jolie Clement right?"

The blinking red light made Jolie feel guilty. She had felt like such a road kill the day before and the last thing she had wanted to do was call Constance, but now she wished she had. "That would be me all right, but I don't understand how I can help you?"

"Have you ever heard of the Ladybug Ball?"

"I'd have to be smoking some of these flowers not to have heard of that. I've never attended but I hear it's quite the grand affair, with the extra-added bonus of raising lots of money for a really

good cause. It's in about six weeks if I remember correctly."

Amused green eyes appraised the young woman as the nun mirrored Jolie's posture. "You remember correctly and we're looking forward to a bigger and better year. Every year the event grows more than seems possible but we don't ever complain because the money raised goes to the children at St. Genevieve's. We're hoping to finish the addition to the girl's dorm with the proceeds from this year's event."

There were a few lines on the woman's face, but Jolie had to smile at the energy that radiated off her as she spoke. It was impossible to miss her enthusiasm for the people she served. "Are you roaming the streets looking for volunteers?"

"I'm sorry, I get carried away sometimes. Let me start at the beginning. I'm Sister Ruth Peters and I actually need a florist."

"You're Becker's Sister Ruth?"

Ruth clapped her hands together and laughed. "You know my rascal?"

"Sort of...did she...I mean," Jolie temporarily lost the ability to talk at the thought of Becker again, much less thinking about Ruth finding out how they met and spent time together. "I'm sorry. Did she ask you to come here?"

"Becker usually sees to every detail every year, but this year she's been a little busy, so like I said before, it was her friend Constance who recommended you. It's all right to say no, sweetie. Despite what you've been told, us nuns really can't damn you to hell no matter what."

In that one tease, Jolie was able to see a little of Becker and the sense of humor she had shown much too seldom in their time together. "No, ma'am, I wouldn't dream of saying no. Becker told me about the rulers you carry around and I'm fond of my knuckles just the way they are, thank you."

"This outfit was good for that, but it's murder in the summer. I sure don't miss having to wear it everyday."

"Attending a costume party today?"

"I attended a mass for the Bishop's birthday this morning so the dress uniform was called for. Thanks to Becker, we don't have to bow and scrape before the Diocese like we used to, but sometimes duty calls."

The day before may have been murder on her emotional well being, but something told Jolie this was the second chance she was looking for. She took a deep breath and opened the drawer in front of her. It was full of the pads she used to jot down ideas and Jolie was willing to give this woman her time and best effort. "What part of the event would you like us to work on?" If anything, the publicity from the affiliation would be helpful.

"We want you to do all the flowers, Miss Clement. No sense in breaking it up into small jobs and dealing with more people than I have to." Ruth misunderstood the look on the young woman's face and charged on ahead. "If you think I'm expecting you to donate all the work and materials, I'm not cruel enough to ask you to do that. I'm just here to ask for your friendly nun discount and your commitment to work with me."

"I'd love to, Sister."

The rest of that first visit had revolved around the themes the organizers had come up with and Jolie offering Ruth her opinions. When they were done, the florist had a pad full of ideas and a starting point. From then on Jolie threw herself into the project and came up with a slew of new designs to show Ruth for their next meeting. A few days later, she didn't even look up from the kitchen table, and the designs that covered it, when Wendy came by to pick up some of Claire's things. Jolie figured if Claire wanted to talk to her, she didn't need a middleman to do it.

The closer the event got, the farther apart she and Claire became, only speaking when it was necessary to withdraw funds from their still joint accounts. Now that money wasn't a factor in fixing everything in their lives, it was their life together that was fractured beyond repair. For Jolie the best gift she had received in just about forever was the friendship Ruth offered so readily. It was with her help that she made a decision too long in coming.

It was Monday afternoon and Jolie put on a fresh pot of coffee as she waited for Ruth. After she'd agreed to help her with the Ladybug Ball, they had made a standing date on Monday afternoons to discuss all the things Jolie was responsible for. No matter how much she wanted to bring it up, the one topic they had never touched on was Becker.

Today, she'd had time to stop at the bakery and buy some of the scones Ruth liked and she was arranging them on a plate when a very relaxed looking nun walked in. As she had mentioned on their first meeting, Ruth rarely wore her habit, and like Jolie, was partial to jeans and tennis shoes if she could get away with it. Her hair was pulled back, and though touched by some gray, still retained much of the blonde Becker had described to her when she told her about the day Ruth taught her to dance.

"What?" asked Ruth when Jolie started laughing.

"I just find it humorous that you wear jeans and Becker won't be caught dead in them."

"That's because Becker is a stick in the mud and I'm not." Ruth put her bag down and rubbed her hands together in anticipation of eating a scone. The brief mention of Becker's name wasn't much but it was the entrée she needed to get to the conversation she was dying to have. "Tell me a story, Jolie."

"What would you like to hear?"

"Tell me why my rascal looks like someone stole the light from her heart when I see her every week? I know you know each other, but you, well neither of you, talks about the other when you're with me." She pointed the corner of the scone at the young blonde and stopped the protest before it formed. "And before you think of telling me you don't know what I mean, I should tell you I lied about the whole damning thing. Nuns are given special compensation, when we take our vows, to send you straight to hell. You don't get to pass go and collect two hundred dollars. You go straight to hell if you think about lying."

After she stopped laughing, Jolie told her the whole story. When she finished they were both in tears and not from laughing. "I wake up now and I really don't know what I want, but I do think I've come to one decision."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want, but I do want you to do something for me."

As if she were tired of crying, Jolie impatiently wiped her face and nodded. "I can't promise too much these days but I'll try."

"Go back to Claire, Jolie, and finish what you started. If you don't, you'll be waking up and not knowing what you want for a long time to come. You made promises to her and it's time to resolve those."

She nodded again and the tears started again. Knowing something was right and doing it sometimes were vastly different. Ruth's advice was sound but the thought of physically going about it was making Jolie ill. However, the nun was right. There was no way she could move forward without mending the broken pieces in her heart, that started with Claire and what they had shared together.

"It's going to be all right, sweetheart, I'll help you through this if you want me to and together we'll make it out all right, you'll see," Ruth promised as she held Jolie and rubbed her back.

"I'll hold you to that."

It had been so long since they'd seen each other so Jolie just stood in the back of the crowded room and looked at the woman sitting on the floor doing something she obviously loved. In an unguarded moment, Jolie was able to see so much of the person Becker Gaudet tried to hide from the world as the tall woman looked down to answer a question from one of the little girls sitting on her lap.

"Just like clock work," said Ruth when she walked up and bumped shoulders with the woman who was almost exactly her height. "No matter what she has going on, she's here every Friday night reading until she gets them all to go to sleep."

"There are so many of them," Jolie pointed to the small children in the room sitting as close as

possible to the giant with the stack of books.

"It's sad, but at one time orphans were defined by someone like Becker. They were abandoned, not by circumstance but by fate. Sadly that isn't the case anymore. A lot of these little ones are here because their folks aren't very nice people, but because of Becker and the charitable events she organizes for us, we don't have to turn anyone away anymore." Ruth put her arm around Jolie's waist and studied her face. Gone were the shadows that had haunted it since the day they'd met and the green eyes looked like they had found peace. "Want to talk about it?"

"Once the ball is over would you mind if we still kept our Monday afternoon dates?"

"I'd love that. Other than the occasional bingo game, us nuns don't get out much, so we appreciate the invitations even when it's just for free therapy sessions."

"Good, then I can tell you I'd love to talk about it, only there's one talk I have to have first so you don't get gypped out of the whole story. And it gives me time to run and buy a couch for my office since you're willing to fix me." With a deep breath, Jolie kissed Ruth's forehead and stepped further into the room so Becker could see her. A welcome laugh escaped when the woman who had haunted her dreams dropped the book at the sight of her.

"Jolie?"

"Hi guys. My name is Jolie and I brought something Sister Ruth told me you'd like a lot."

A sea of young faces turned and looked up at her expectantly, and as if being prompted, all of them asked, "What?"

The other nuns who lived and worked with Ruth came in carrying homemade cookies and trays of milk. The bribe worked, making them forget about storytelling hour for a bit and leaving the reader looking like she was about to bolt.

"Know something?" asked Jolie. She offered her hand to help Becker off the floor not really needing a verbal response. "I got asked out on a date this year for Valentine's Day, and as wonderful as the date was, I find myself a little ticked off."

"Whatever for?" Becker didn't let go of her hand and followed the blonde out to the courtyard at the center of the compound.

"I was swept off my feet by the most wonderful woman and then she sort of dumped me." When they stopped, Jolie stepped in front of her and took hold of Becker's other hand. "I have to know right now if I have any chance of that happening again."

"Which part?"

"Call me selfish, but I'd like to go with the being swept off my feet part. We may have started under the most bizarre of circumstances but I want to try, and see where we end up because I

know I wasn't the only one who felt something after that kiss."

The small hands in hers weren't the smoothest Becker had ever held but Jolie worked with flowers and thorny stems all day long so there was always some nick or cut to be dealt with, but to Becker it didn't matter. It was the woman's heart she was interested in and from what she knew about the petite blonde it was beautiful. Jolie's hands were one of the many things Becker had thought about since the day they had spent together. The short twenty-four hours was too little time, and for Becker, magnified all the things she didn't know about the blonde.

"I didn't really dump you, you do realize this right?" Becker pulled her a little closer and let go of one of the small hands so she could touch Jolie's face. "It's just that, at a million dollars a day, I'd be broke in no time."

It felt like it had been years since Jolie had laughed but the joke made her fall against Becker and laugh until she felt tears rolling down her cheeks. This felt so right and after the past couple of days she'd endured, it was like finding a warm blanket and a fire in the middle of an ice storm.

"I missed you, Beck, and I came by tonight to ask you out on a date."

Fingers roughened by oilfield work wiped away Jolie's tears and Becker thought they were both people who wore their work on their skin for the world to see, but what was in their hearts very few were privileged to know. "I'd love nothing better than to say yes, but if I have you, I want to be the only one to have you. Call me selfish but I don't think I could share you with anyone else, nor would I want to be the other woman."

"Claire and I haven't been together for awhile now," she pressed her fingers against Becker's lips to keep her silent. "It wasn't your fault and it wasn't the night we spent together. I've thought about this a lot and I think if our relationship had been strong enough, both of us would have told you to go to hell when you made the offer. The fact that she encouraged me to do it and I accepted, well, it made me rethink things like where I wanted to be and who I wanted to be with."

"But will you hold my offer against me?"

"I thought about that as well. Maybe you won't agree with what I did but a couple of days ago I met with Claire and we went over what we've done with the money so far and what each of us would get if we decided to split it down the middle and walk away." Jolie spotted a bench not far from them and pulled Becker along with her. This was going to take time and she wanted to do it right.

"Did she agree to that?"

A small nod was followed by a long stretch of silence. No matter their problems and all the reasons that had driven them apart, Jolie had shared five years with Claire and it hurt that the woman would've jumped so eagerly to get out of the commitment she'd made. "With very little difficulty. I think what helped me was you putting the money in my name. According to my

attorney, there really wasn't anything legally binding to make me share it."

"So Claire got her bar, and a healthy cash settlement and you got a lot of grief I'm guessing, if your eyes are telling me anything." The green orbs were shiny with tears and Becker felt there was a lot Jolie wasn't telling her.

"How is it you can read me so well in so short a time and she couldn't?"

"Because I did something I feel Claire stopped doing a long time ago." Becker moved closer to her and put her arm around Jolie's shoulders. "And it isn't your fault that happened. I've met plenty of people who are guilty of this."

"What?"

"They either stop looking or they're looking but never at what's right in front of them. The horizon is something you should study every once in awhile, but when you focus on nothing else, then the people and things right in front of you blur and get lost." She kissed the top of the blonde head tucked under her chin and gave flight to the courage Ruth had instilled in her so long before. "I saw you standing next to a man made lake and I found a million reasons to look, and given time I'll find millions more to keep looking."

The words washed away any pain Jolie had left and she released it in a cascade of tears.

"Promise me something?"

"Anything."

"Promise me you'll tell me stuff like that occasionally even if we don't end up together."

The arm around Jolie's shoulders tightened and Becker kissed the side of her head this time.

"Why in the world wouldn't we end up together?"

"I saw the way that girl was looking at you in there, Ms. Gaudet." Jolie was referring to another young and very attractive young woman who stood close to her at the back of the room when she had arrived. It was hard to miss the clear look of adoration on the brunette's face when she too looked at Becker as she read. "Even if you like her half as much as she likes you, the two of you must be blissfully happy." It was Becker's turn to laugh until she cried. With no effort, she lifted Jolie off the wooden surface and onto her lap. "What's so damned funny?"

Jolie happily wiped Becker's face clean and accepted a brief kiss as thanks. "When I turned eighteen and had to leave here and had to go out and find a job, I promised Ruth I'd come back one day and help with what I could. Eventually I was able to not only help but found I had some influence. I petitioned the Diocese and Ruth was put in charge when the wicked witch of the west retired."

"Becker," Ruth's voice came out of the darkness.

"Stop eavesdropping, old woman, and get back inside."

"Then stop speaking ill of the dead before I turn you over my knee." The two women heard a door open and the laughter of children spilled out.

"I thought you told me it was a sin to tell a lie?" asked Becker as she wiggled her brows at Jolie, the question meant for a still listening Ruth.

"And I also told you I'd never take after you with a big ruler," came the quick response.

"I'm sorry you never got to know your parents but I do thank the heavens Ruth came into your life," said Jolie sincerely. "We've spent a lot of time together recently and I can see why you love her so much."

"Thank you, but let me finish my story. It took some doing on my part but I finally got them to agree and, when Ruth took this place over, I brought a crew over here and we stayed for about three months. We painted and added some color along with toys and books. Growing up here wasn't horrible, but it was like a prison with the stark walls and plain everything."

The murals in the room where the children had been listening to Becker read and the garden they were sitting in didn't resemble a prison to Jolie. "You did a good job then because this place is great, from the little I've seen."

"The last thing I insisted she clean out of here were the habits. I remember walking home as a kid and seeing some of the other kids' moms waiting outside and none of them looked like a penguin having a bad day, so I asked Ruth to drag her sisters into the twenty first century."

Jolie wrapped a curl around her finger and smiled. "Thanks for telling me that story, but I'm not sure why you did."

"I told you that story because you think I'm dating some girl you saw earlier. That nice young lady looks at everyone like she loves them because she's a nun, not because she wants me to take her to a school dance."

"If I asked you really nicely, would you take me to a school dance?"

Their teasing came to an end when they looked at one another and saw the two people who had bid each other farewell in a beautiful room above a sea of neon lights even though they didn't want to. Only now, there was nowhere they had to rush off to and no one was waiting once they arrived.

"Can you see me as someone in your life?" Jolie stayed on Becker's lap and put her hands on the woman's shoulders.

"The important question is - can you see yourself in my life?" asked Becker in return.

"I can't see myself any other way."

Becker pulled her forward and kissed her in a way that held nothing of what she felt back. It had been a hellish span of time since she'd felt her heart dropping faster than the elevator at the Bellagio the night she'd left Jolie behind. In the end, the pain had been her own fault.

Ruth had done everything she could think to do to convince Becker to at least call Jolie and tell the blonde how she felt. By then, Ruth knew what had happened between Jolie and Claire, but felt it was betraying the young woman's confidence to go behind her back to inform Becker.

"I've missed you so much," Becker confessed as they pulled apart. "There's so much I want to know about you because, in that little time we spent together, you've done something to me, Jolie, that's made it impossible to forget you."

The fact she was this close to Becker again and there was nothing holding her back made Jolie want to pinch both of them to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "Some things are best left unexplained, but I know what you mean. I just want you to know, it wasn't the money, or the day you gave me, that brought me here to you."

Having grown up with only Ruth to care for her and make her feel loved, Becker had become a person who always questioned people's feelings toward her. Once she'd built her company and having enough money was no longer an issue, devotion had not been a hard thing to come by. The problem was it always came with a price. To have someone admit the money wasn't an issue had always made her defenses go up.

"Then what did?"

It was impossible to miss the guarded look in the blue eyes, but it only made Jolie smile. "It was how I felt after that night with you. What I mean is, how I felt about myself. You gave me back a little of what I thought I had to let go of because I wanted to share my life with someone else."

"I don't know what you mean." In all honesty, Becker had no idea what Jolie was talking about. She had lived her life with only a few people she felt comfortable calling friends but no one she could say she loved with all her heart in such a way that she would sacrifice anything for them.

"When Claire and I first got together, it was the first time I wanted to or could see myself waking up next to someone for years to come. Because I wanted that, I was willing to do or give things I wasn't completely comfortable doing or giving." She kissed Becker again for a long time to keep her from saying anything to cut in. "I know you have plenty to say on the subject, but let me finish." The reprimand came with another soft kiss and a smile. "I see now that if someone truly loves you, they want you to change because it makes you a better person, not because of what they'll gain from the change themselves."

"And Claire wanted to gain something from the experience?"

"Honey, you know what Claire wanted to gain from the experience." She tugged playfully on a

lock of Becker's hair that had spilled over the tall woman's collar. "You on the other hand just wanted to spend time with me to show me what a spectacular person I am. Well unless you lied."

"I didn't lie, especially about how spectacular you are. You're a beautiful woman, Jolie, so much so that I haven't been able to forget you."

"Then how fortunate for me." Jolie reached down for one of Becker's hands and pulled it to her chest. "I'm not saying this'll be easy, but it isn't impossible if you want to try. That's all I'm asking."

"I've missed you enough to give you whatever you like. If it's a date then the answer is yes."

They broke apart from the soft kiss when they heard clapping coming from the covered walkway that circled the courtyard they were sitting in. Jolie was the first to start laughing as she fell against Becker's chest, loving the way the strong arms came around her automatically when she did.

"Fabulous, you both came to your senses and can lose those pathetic frowns, and as much as you're enjoying the night air out here, there are a bunch of kids in there that want to hear a story." Ruth clapped her hands together and stepped out where they both could see her.

"I feel like I'm fourteen and my mother just caught us necking," whispered Jolie. She squeezed the fingers that had entwined with hers and gladly followed Becker when she stood up and started towards the large comfortable playroom.

"Get used to it. She lives for moments when she gets to embarrass you about something."

"Why do you think so?"

Becker looked to see where Ruth was standing before answering since she wanted to speak loud enough for her to hear. "I think it's the whole celibacy thing. It makes them crazy."

The blonde really did start laughing when the older woman took off after Becker like she intended to do serious harm. When the chase ended not too far from her, Jolie's eyes misted over again at the tight hug Ruth gave Becker. She was treated to one as well before going back in to listen while Becker finished her reading.

Two sets of green eyes looked on as the tall woman was once again surrounded by children. "I have to tell you, Jolie, don't ever let anyone try to convince you prayer doesn't work."

Jolie's eyes never left Becker but she did squint a bit when she didn't understand the question. "I'm sure in your profession it's important but what does that have to do with me?"

"I met Becker when she had just turned twelve and from that day on I prayed that she would someday find the one person who would carefully pick up the pieces of that fractured heart and lovingly put them back together. It might have taken years but my prayers have been answered

because here you are."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Life will never come with assurance for anything, sweetheart, but I do know my rascal and what lengths she goes to when it's someone she cares about. The way she looks at you, Jolie, should be assurance enough for you, and assurance to me that my prayers have been answered."

"Now just start praying that it all works out."

Jolie walked through the house one more time checking to make sure everything was still in place before Becker arrived. There was no way she could recreate anything close to the date Becker had planned for Valentine's Day, so she decided to do what she could to make this one memorable.

There was a shrimp stew simmering on the stove and a large bowl of potato salad in the refrigerator. It wasn't fancy but it was one of the meals her grandmother had taught her to cook and Jolie had always considered it comfort food. As busy as Becker was, the blonde figured it had been awhile since anyone had prepared a home cooked meal for her.

"With any luck, I'll be doing it a lot more often after tonight," she told her reflection as she made one final check of her outfit. Her last surprise was sitting on the coffee table in the living room and she hoped Becker liked it. Oscar had been more than helpful when she called for sizes. At first, she didn't know what to make of all the laughing but he assured her that she was the only one in the world who could make Becker bend on the subject.

She looked at her watch when the doorbell echoed through the house, noticing Becker was five minutes early. In the dating world that usually meant desperate, but in Jolie's case, she took it as a good sign that the tall woman was anxious to see her. A week had passed since their conversation at St. Genevieve's and while they hadn't seen each other since, Becker had called everyday in between her meetings in Houston. If there had been any doubt the businesswoman only thought of her on occasion, Jolie received another call every night to see how things were going and just to talk.

"Hey," Jolie leaned against the door after offering the greeting. She was sure Becker was somewhere behind the very large bouquet of Stargazer Lilies hovering at the entrance to the house but Jolie wasn't sure.

"I know you're probably sick of flowers when you get home, but I found these in your yard and I couldn't resist."

"Ah, I can call my neighbor back and tell him to cancel the call to the police," Jolie teased back. "Thank you." She accepted the flowers and the kiss Becker offered before waving her into the house. "Make yourself at home while I find something to put these in."

The house smelled wonderful and Becker took her time looking around the room before taking a seat on the comfortable looking sofa. The room wasn't large or opulent, but it felt warm and inviting, much like Jolie did when Becker was in her company. She picked up a framed picture from the side table and studied the large gathering of people like she always did these kinds of pictures. There was a longing in Becker's soul for the feeling of belonging to a family like the little blonde girl sitting in the front bottom of the shot, surrounded by what looked to be everyone she was related to.

"That was taken at my Great Granny Clement's ninetieth birthday party," explained Jolie as she took the cushion next to Becker.

Becker accepted the glass she was being offered and listened as Jolie pointed out and named everyone in the picture. Her brows spiked a little when she tasted her favorite brand of vodka. "How many siblings does that make again?" They had talked about this during the week but the number Jolie had given had to be wrong.

"I'm one of thirteen." She put her glass down and tugged on Becker's jacket. Jolie understood she had come straight from the airport but tonight wasn't about trying to impress each other. "This has to come off."

"Aren't you going to feed me before you try to start undressing me?"

"The only way you're getting fed tonight is to start shedding some of this stuff, hotshot, so get going." The jacket came off and Jolie threw it over the back of the sofa onto the floor. "Since you bought me something, I thought I'd return the favor." Jolie picked up the box and handed it over.

"You didn't have to do this." The way Becker was looking at her belied her statement.

A smile that could light the Vegas strip took over Jolie's face when she saw the excitement reflected on Becker's face and in her eyes. "You're right, I didn't have to. I wanted to. Go on, open it."

A second after being given permission, Becker ripped through the paper and had to laugh when she found a pair of jeans in the box along with a t-shirt. "Are you trying to tell me something, Jolie?"

"That you're a stuffed shirt, Gaudet, so go change or no stew for you." A slim finger tapped the end of Becker's nose along with the teasing remark.

"My shoes don't exactly go with this outfit," Becker pointed out. That excuse didn't work either and a little while later, she was sitting in the kitchen eating a wonderful meal in her new clothes, and bare feet.

"Do you like it?" Jolie had her feet resting on top of Becker's to keep them off the cool floor. There hadn't been much talk after she put a bowl of food and a beer in front of Becker.

"I'm sorry, this is wonderful." Putting her spoon down, Becker reached across the table for the blonde's hand. Despite their limited time together she felt very taken care of. "You did a wonderful job and I'm an idiot for not pointing it out before now."

"You're not an idiot. Now if you were sitting here not eating and not talking we'd have a problem."

Becker reviewed all the small things that had highlighted the night so far. Her drink of choice to start, a nice dinner that included her favorite beer and the new clothes she was wearing. Jolie had done her homework to provide all the things she liked and had done so in a way that Becker hadn't noticed until that moment.

"I am an idiot, so don't argue with me." Becker slid out of her chair and onto her knees on the floor next to Jolie. "All the stuff you did tonight, it makes me feel like you want me here."

"I do," Jolie turned a little in her seat so her body would be facing Becker.

"That doesn't happen often just because. Before we go any further with this, I think you should know I don't trust easily."

Jolie pulled her forward and kissed her until she felt the tall body relax against hers and Becker's hands come around her waist. "I want you to do something for me." The blue eyes looked dazed as Becker nodded. "Don't feel like you have to trust me. In fact I don't want you to feel anything, just accept what I do for what it is." She joined her hands behind Becker's neck and rested their foreheads together. "And what I want to do for you is to show you how much I want you in my life. With time I know that'll be something you not only come to trust, it'll be something you just know in here." One small hand moved down until Jolie's palm was pressed flat over Becker's heart.

The meal was finished with their chairs pulled a little closer together and new openness both of them found refreshing. New relationships were usually about stumbling out of the starting blocks and working to the point where you felt comfortable enough to let the other person see you for who you were. That wasn't the case for either of them. Their short time together wasn't a factor since a bet had left them with the insight into a part of the other's heart that could be used to move forward.

"Thank you again for all this," said Becker as she stood near the door when their night was coming to an end.

"Want to do it all over again tomorrow night?"

"I'll do whatever you want to spend more time with you, don't worry about that." She had to laugh as her suit and shoes were handed to her in a plastic grocery bag. "But before I miss out on the opportunity I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away."

"Would you consider going with me to the Ladybug Ball?"

Jolie moved closer and put her hands on Becker's shoulders. "How much is it worth to you for me to say yes?" The speed in which the walls came up in Becker's eyes almost made Jolie take a step back and she wanted to take back the comment when the tall woman flinched as she reached for her. To back down now and give Becker the space she was silently asking for was to admit failure in Jolie's mind so she reached out and put her hands on her shoulders. "Honey, I was kidding. I'm sorry if you don't know that sometimes my mouth overtakes my brain and I say some incredibly stupid stuff."

"It's all right."

"No it's not. I hurt your feelings and made you doubt why we're here, so it's not all right. I would love to go to Ruth's event with you, but it will cost you one thing."

"What?"

The fact Becker hadn't moved away from her gave Jolie courage. "I'll go with you if you promise to dance with me."

The blonde's answer broke the barriers Becker had erected around her heart and she gave into the feelings Jolie had awakened. "It's a date then," murmured Becker, her lips so close to Jolie's the blonde felt them move when she answered.

As the night of the ball grew closer, Jolie's nerves got worse. She had been working overtime to get her part of the job done, leaving no time to actually plan on getting herself together. The panic really didn't set in until Ruth explained how formal an occasion it was, something she should've realized herself when she and her assistant placed arrangements on the auction tables. The items available weren't on display yet, but the cards set out with descriptions weren't things you found at events where people with slim pockets would be attending. Aside from the dress Becker had given her in Las Vegas, Jolie was at a loss as to what to wear.

"What time do you want me here tomorrow?" asked Bridget. The young redhead was finishing floral school in the fall and planned to keep working with Jolie once she graduated.

Jolie's face became a little distorted looking when she reached up and pulled her hair in frustration. The extra help she had hired to help them with the project had fallen through and they had been working long hours in an effort not to let Ruth down. "I hate to ask you to come in at the crack of dawn again tomorrow but we have a truckload of flowers arriving in the morning and we have to get them ready for the table centerpieces." They had been at the shop since eight and there was still a lot to do before Jolie could think of going home.

"Why don't you let me stay and help you tonight?" She turned her head when she heard someone knocking on the front door. "Expecting someone?" It was now after nine and the sun had long since set.

"The loony farm people to cart me away for agreeing to do this without hiring extra help," guessed Jolie.

"If it's them, they can't have you just yet," teased Bridget. "I'm not unloading all that stuff by myself tomorrow while you take it easy in a padded cell." She followed Jolie to the front in case her boss needed her help in getting rid of whoever it was.

"There's no way in hell," said Jolie in a voice that belied what she was seeing. She almost ran to open the locked door and let the visitor in.

"Hello," the woman held out a card and smile. "My name is Constance and I'm here to see if you need anything."

Ignoring the card, Jolie pulled her in, shut the door and gave her a hug. Becker had told her their mutual friend was coming in as she always did for Ruth's fundraiser and was anxious to see Jolie again. "It's great to see you."

"Not as great as it is to see you, my friend, especially after my long talk with Becker. Congratulations on that end by the way, but we'll have plenty of time to talk about that later. I really was serious about coming over to help."

"Unless you flew down here with the Bellagio's gardening staff, I'm afraid our visit will have to wait until this thing is done." Jolie turned around and pointed to a tremendous amount of buckets full of flowers behind them.

"Ah, so it's casino services you're in need of huh?" Constance moved back to the door and opened it. "It's a good thing for you I happen to work in that area of the casino isn't it?"

Jolie recognized the uniforms the four men and three women were wearing and wanted to cry from the relief. It wasn't the whole staff but more than enough of the casino's floral department to make the next day a cinch. "Oh my God, Constance, you're a lifesaver," said the blonde as she hugged her friend again.

The bell over the door jingled again and Constance smiled over Jolie's head. "Just like the night we met and I was of assistance, I'd love to take the credit, but a little birdie told me you needed help."

Jolie did cry when she turned and saw Becker standing in her doorway wearing the pair of jeans she had gotten for her. The tall woman was still wearing a dress shirt, but the denim was a sure sign Jolie was making progress in making a difference in Becker's life. How much she had missed Becker spoke volumes of how much she was changing the blonde's outlook.

The last three days had taken the tall woman to Washington DC to lobby for some legislation her industry was interested in. For the florist, the separation couldn't have come at a worse time. "I missed you so much and thank you for doing this for me." Everyone in the room found something to look at when the two welcomed each other with a very long kiss.

"I like doing stuff for you so there's no need to thank me." She started walking Jolie to the door and to the waiting car outside. "Right now there's a need for you to go home and get some rest."

"But, Becker..."

"But Becker nothing. These people are here to help you and you're going to let them," she put her fingers under the blonde's chin to encourage Jolie to raise her head. "Let me take you home, okay?"

"I'll stay and show them around if you want," offered Bridget.

Oscar gave her a hug as well when he helped her into the back of the car once Jolie gave in. There were bags of Chinese food on the seat next to him so there was no reason for any of them to go out again for the evening. Jolie was so tired she never asked why he unloaded Constance's luggage at her house when he dropped them off, and smiled when Jolie just pointed to a room where he could put them.

They shared the food and Oscar waited in the car as Becker said her goodnights. In the weeks his boss had been seeing the young woman, Oscar had come to really care about the petite blonde. In her, he saw another ally in keeping Becker happy, asking nothing in return but to be cared about.

"I'll call you in the morning," Becker promised before lowering her head for another kiss.

"You could stay and just look across the pillow if you want to talk to me." They had shared plenty of meals, telephone conversations, and kisses but they hadn't gone beyond that, leaving them both frustrated.

"Do you want me to stay?"

It was the first time Jolie thought Becker would do anything she asked, and the one time she had a houseguest for the evening. "Life just sucks sometimes doesn't it?" She whispered the question into Becker's chest.

"Excuse me?"

"I want you to stay more than anything in the world, but I don't want our first night together to be a night we both are aware of Constance being right across the hall from us." She kissed the bit of skin she could get to from the gap between the buttons on Becker's shirt. "So wouldn't you agree with me that sometimes life just sucks?"

"That it does, darlin'." Becker laughed when Jolie stepped up and stood on her feet. "But my

philosophy is that things that suck must eventually stop."

"When it comes to you, let's hope that's not true." Jolie did laugh this time when her teasing colored Becker's ears with the adorable blush she liked to call the St. Genevieve effect from Becker's upbringing. "I'm sorry."

"No, I doubt highly that you're sorry, Miss Jolie. But I'm crazy about you so don't worry about it." Becker kissed her forehead and opened the door. "Get some sleep and I'll call you in the morning."

Jolie sighed and leaned against the now locked front door as she heard the engine starting. She turned and faced the woman standing at the back end of the foyer clapping her hands, and smiled. "Good for you, Jolie. I've known Becker for a couple of years and I've never seen her look this happy." Constance cocked her head to the side and laughed at the lovesick expression on the blonde's face. "Or in jeans for that matter. However you managed it, I'm glad. I think she's needed someone like you in her life for a long time."

"I want to believe that with all that I am, but sometimes I wonder if I'll ever truly fit in Becker's life."

"Why would you think that?"

They retired to the sofa and put up their feet as all of Jolie's insecurities came pouring out. There was one thing the blonde had never had a lot of, and it was money. Being one of thirteen children, her parents had done the best they could and they were happy but never really able to afford the nicer things that life had to offer. That upbringing had shaped her attitude about money, something Claire had never come to appreciate.

"Can I offer you some advice?" Constance reached over and put her hand on Jolie's knee.

"I would love some."

"Always be honest with her about your feelings, and never fear she'll turn you away because of them. Becker's and your beginnings may be different in circumstance but they are very similar in station. She'll know where you're coming from, but it doesn't mean there isn't a place for you at her side. Don't punish the both of you because she has means now, in much more abundance than you'll ever have."

"I took a million dollars from her for a date."

"You did, but it was she who offered, not you who asked. She is also well aware of the circumstance you found yourself in when you had to accept, and the fact Claire was pushing you along. No one is holding you responsible for her actions, and they were her actions, Jolie." The brunette looked Jolie in the eye and tried to gauge if the woman was lying. "Do you not want a chance with her?"

"Of course I do."

"Then what's this about?"

A rambling explanation came pouring out of Jolie and her confessor listened with a very understanding disposition. Constance's job was fixing things on a daily basis so people were happy, and all Jolie's worries were about things. As long as the concerns didn't stem from the fundamentals that made up the feelings between two people, everything was fixable.

She let Jolie finish before she smiled as she stood up and offered the blonde a hand up. "I understand why you're worried but you don't need to be." They started down the hall towards the house's bedrooms so Constance could put her charge to bed. "I just need to know one thing."

"What?"

"Do you love her?"

For someone usually sure of herself, Jolie opened and shut her mouth a few times before any words to answer that question formed in her head. It wasn't as if she hadn't thought of what her feelings were for Becker, she just hadn't had the courage to attach words to what was in her heart.

"Yes."

"Are you sure or are you telling me what you think I want to hear because she's my friend?"

"Not that I have to justify my feelings to you, but Becker is the first person I've ever been with who only wants me. In the beginning of our relationship Claire was forever chasing this level of success she thought would make her matter, even though I'd have been happy with just her attention. I kept telling her that, but the chase for the golden ring never stopped. In Las Vegas Claire thought the Gaudet money would buy our future, but for me, it's almost a guarantee Becker only sees me. Anything else she can buy. Unlike my ex, Becker doesn't see me as some asset to be bought or sold on a whim."

"In a way she's already bought you," Constance reminded Jolie of her earlier statement.

"You can't tell me you're as simplistic a thinker as Claire can you?"

Constance spread her hands out and smiled. "What? You think that for a big payday, I think you slept with her?"

"Precisely."

Constance's hair pulled free from where she had it pinned when she shook her head. "I'd be willing to bet you the same million you didn't."

Jolie nodded and laughed. "What makes you so sure?" She pointed her thumb in the direction of the front door. "Is it your belief in her or in me?"

"Let me put it this way. If Becker were someone who would pay a hefty price tag for a whore, then she would have stayed tonight and bedded her with little or no feelings for what I would have thought."

The blonde head nodded again as if agreeing with the logic. "So it was her you believe in?"

"Let me finish." Constance reached in, clicked on the light to the guestroom, and took a seat on the bed. "If it was a whore she'd bought, you would have let her with little or no feelings for what I would have thought."

The carpet felt soft and warm against Jolie's toes as she buried them in the pile. "So where does that leave us?"

"It leaves us at the end of a very long day, Jolie, knowing what we both knew at the beginning."

Green eyes pinned Constance in place and almost begged for an answer. "And that is?"

"That you've found love in the unlikeliest of places and it's found you. I may have time on my side as far as knowing Becker, but I can honestly say, you're the one person besides Ruth and Oscar who know her and who she really is. Don't squander that."

"And the rest?"

"The rest is so easy you'll kick yourself for worrying about it." She watched as Jolie went into the bathroom to check to make sure there were fresh towels for the morning. "Trust me. The rest is the easiest part."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because in a way Claire was right."

Of all the answers Constance could have given her, that was the last one Jolie expected and it made her laugh. "How do you figure?"

"You did meet your fairy godmother in Las Vegas, only it wasn't Becker Gaudet." Constance stood and bowed. "That would be me and I work in cities outside Vegas if you were wondering, so trust me, the rest is easy. It's the reason I asked Oscar to bring in my bags. I'm going to help you with the easy stuff, Ms. Clement."

"If you're my fairy godmother, what does that make Becker?"

"She, my dear, is that dashing young princess your mother always told you about in bedtime stories, who's coming to take you to the ball. And tomorrow night, she's going to be the envy of

everyone there once they get a load of her date."

[Continued in Chapter 4](#)

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~ A Million Reasons ~

by Ali Vali

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

Chapter 4

"I feel like a chaperone," said Ruth as she looked out at the passing houses. Becker had come by to pick her up, like she did every year, and the nun was excited to be along for the ride to pick up Jolie.

"You act like one and I'll give a big enough donation to the church so you'll be ministering to a bunch of real penguins in Antarctica," teased Becker. The closer they got to Jolie's house the tighter her collar felt.

"Stop tugging on that or you're going to look like a ragamuffin by the time we get there. Promise me you're going to have fun."

"Of course I'm planning on having fun," Becker took her eyes off the road for a second and looked at Ruth as if she'd lost her mind.

"Not just tonight, rascal. This young woman isn't a one-night kind of deal, and just like those bullies I found you beating up on the day I met you, I don't want you to turn away from her because of fear. You stand up for yourself and show her how you feel."

Becker nodded before putting the car in park and going around to open Ruth's door for her. She had called that morning as promised but had only been able to get Jolie's machine all day. Her nervousness stemmed from the fear that Jolie had changed her mind, not just about the night, but about everything.

"Stand up straight and smile," Ruth fussed with Becker's jacket as they waited for someone to answer the door. "Hi, Constance, don't you look beautiful."

"Sister Ruth, we've missed you at the slots," joked Constance as she hugged the nun hello. "Are you ready to go?"

"You bet. We've done all we can so it's time to let the little ones fly on their own." She took Constance's arm and started down the walk to the car just pulling up, driven by Oscar.

"Where are you going?" asked Becker.

"I'm going to have a drink and mingle." Ruth waved and then pointed to keep her in place. "I know we always go together, but tonight doesn't belong to your past, it belongs to your future. Just remember it's vast but not impossible and you still have a lot of walking to do, only now, you have someone to walk the road with you and hold your hand along the way."

"You do you know, if you're interested." Jolie's voice made her forget the three friends pulling away, but for the life of her, Becker could only stand there and stare when she turned around and got her first look at her date. "I was going to wear the dress you bought me, but then I didn't want you to get bored right off," Jolie went on when all Becker could do was nod her head. "Constance helped me."

"You are so beautiful," Becker whispered in awe.

"Do you mean it?" Nervous hands smoothed down the front of only the second designer dress Jolie had ever put on in her life. Constance had told her not to ask where and how she had acquired it, and after all the stuff they had done that day, from shopping to the salon, Jolie had decided to just be quiet and agree.

"I love you in anything you're wearing, but right now you're just stunning."

"Can I tell you something?"

Becker finally got her feet to move so she walked in and closed the door. She carefully kissed Jolie so she wouldn't ruin the perfect makeup job, barely touched her lips to the blonde's. "You can tell me anything you like."

"I will just as soon as you kiss me hello again. Only this time, do it like you mean it." There was no protest from Becker as she lowered her head again and put her arms around the trim waist. "You make me feel like a beautiful woman, Beck," Jolie confessed when they had to pull apart to breathe. "I'm just so lucky to have found you."

"You are a beautiful woman, Jolie, and we can argue all night about who's luckier but I'd rather hold you and dance with you."

Becker picked up the blonde's wrap up from the back of the sofa as Jolie picked up her bag. "Ruth already called me today to make me promise her I'd let you dance with her at least one time, other than that, I'm all yours."

"Do you promise?" The tall woman's hands came to rest on Jolie's shoulders after she draped her with the beaded silk wrap.

"I promise you a night to remember, and I promise you I'm all yours during and after."

The night was mild by New Orleans standards and there was a slight breeze blowing through City Park when Becker handed the valet her keys and took Jolie's hand. When they were close enough to the entrance of the amusement park, a waiter with a tray of champagne flutes offered them their first drink.

"Aren't you ever afraid of rain?" Jolie lightly tapped her glass against Becker's as they made their way past a gate decorated with garlands of white roses.

"The foundation has a secret weapon when it comes to the weather. After all, we've been organizing this thing for about ten years now and the weather is always perfect."

At one of the bars set up around the rather large area, Ruth tapped Constance on the arm and pointed to the entrance. They both smiled as the blonde leaned into her date and wrapped an arm around one of Becker's. The two made an attractive looking couple.

Jolie stopped their walk, turning Becker so she could see her face and her eyes. Once they had gotten to know each other better, the blonde had come to enjoy the businesswoman's sense of humor and lightning fast wit. "Tell me, Gaudet, what secret weapon do you have against bad weather?"

"A convent full of nuns saying novenas for just right conditions. I doubt anyone can trump that." The twinkle in her eyes made Jolie laugh and they just stood there for a while looking at each other. Near the large carousel, they both heard the music start and saw a few couples head to the dance floor that had been put down. "Let's get our mingling out of the way so I can go back to giving you adoring looks."

More than a few people came up, shook hands with Becker, and mixed a little business conversation with comments about the event. Jolie took that opportunity to take a walk around and check the placement of arrangements Bridget and her new troop of helpers had put out. There was one item on the auction table that caught her eye and she smiled as she picked up the description card and tapped it against her chin.

"You look like a woman with devious thoughts going through her mind."

"That might be a distinct possibility, so what are you going to do about it?" asked Jolie.

Becker held her hand out, gave her a charming smile, and bowed a little at the waist. "How about I try and dance it out of you? It's not jitterbug music but I think I can manage to make my way through."

They smiled at Oscar and Ruth as they headed to an open space on the dance floor. With the passage of time, the nun had come to see that just because she had taken vows to serve, didn't mean she couldn't on occasion go out, and have a good time. Both Oscar and Becker had done a good job of changing her mind coming by at least once a month and taking her to dinner or a show when there was something worth seeing in town.

"Did you and Constance take Ruth shopping with you?" Becker asked Jolie when they started swaying to the music.

"And how did you know Constance took me shopping?" The blonde pulled a little of Becker's hair and tried to sound intimidating. "I do have the ability to dress myself when the occasion calls for it."

"That you do, darlin', and a mighty good job you do of it." Becker stepped back a little and looked at the outfit Jolie had on one more time. "You did such a good job tonight I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes off you, so please accept my apologies."

"You are such a sweet talker, and in this case you were right, Constance did help quite a lot actually." She pulled Becker back to her and pressed her face against the silk tuxedo jacket. "I guess I should've told you sooner but I was having a hard time with all this."

Becker didn't displace Jolie's head but she moved her hand up to cover the semi naked back in a gesture of comfort. "Trouble with what?"

"We are very different people," started Jolie.

"That's not a bad thing is it? If we're too much alike it would be like dating yourself."

The tease helped Jolie relax and she laughed a little. "What I mean is, I was having a hard time picturing myself fitting into your world. I can picture myself working to make this night possible, behind the scenes that is, but I've never had the desire or the means to attend something like this."

"Are you uncomfortable?" Becker leaned back and put her fingers under Jolie's chin wanting to see the blonde's eyes.

"Tonight is just an analogy, honey, one that best draws the lines between us."

"Tonight is just a party for a good cause," the words came softly and slowly close to Jolie's ear. "You are in my opinion a woman who would feel at home in any world or in any situation, but that isn't important to me." She kissed the beautiful neck exposed because Jolie had pinned her shoulder length hair up in a twist. "What's important to me is that you're happy no matter what we're doing. I want you to continue to create beautiful things, like you did for tonight, so you'll feel the sense of prideful accomplishment you deserve. I want you to continue to dress, however you like, be it jeans or a beautiful dress like you have on tonight. I want you to keep putting your

feet on mine to keep them warm when you cook me dinner, and when you kiss me goodnight at the door."

"Why?" The petite woman tightened her hold on Becker and almost asked her to carry her back to the car and home.

"I want you to keep doing all those things because I know they bring joy into your life no matter whose life or station they fit into. I want you to keep doing them all because it is an essential part of what makes you the woman I love."

"You love me?" The dancers continued on around them but Jolie stopped moving and looked up at the most unpredictable person she had ever met. Unpredictable because she would pick now, in the middle of a crowded park, on the dance floor, to tell her the words she'd been longing to hear. She just didn't realize how much she wanted to hear them until right at that moment. "Do you?"

"I do love you, Jolie. How could I not?" The answer was given just as softly before Becker led her to a more secluded spot. "If you don't feel the same for me, I just ask you to give it time."

"I've had plenty of time to think about it." Jolie stepped closer to her and slipped out of her shoes. Holding on to Becker for balance, she stepped up and onto the taller woman's feet to keep her hose from running on the asphalt sidewalk they were on. "Do you want to know when I first fell for you?"

"I'd love to hear that."

"The night I came up to strike a deal with you in Vegas. On that elevator ride up there I tried to detach myself from the reality of what I was thinking of doing."

With strength, that still surprised Jolie at times, Becker picked her up and carried her to a park bench under an oak lit up with hundreds of small white lights. "What changed your mind?"

"You did," she replied. Sitting on Becker's lap made it easy to kiss her. "I expected a quick tour of your bedroom and that would be that. What I got instead was a soft spoken gentle giant who told me how wonderful and unique I was."

"You are," Becker took one of Jolie's hands and pressed it against her chest.

"To you maybe, but I've never felt that way before. You have to understand, I grew up in a large family so, while I grew up happy and loved, I was part of a mob. I was too busy doing my share of the work for anyone to point out how special I was. Then I met Claire."

A waiter approached from the carousel area carrying a couple more champagne flutes. He delivered them without a word and left just as quickly as he could. The blonde laughed when he stopped and picked up her shoes from where she'd left them. The heels sat next to their drinks on his tray.

Jolie turned back to Becker, gazing into the brilliant blue eyes. "I met her and I felt like I was always running to reach a place someone kept moving further and further away." The florist stopped to smell and appreciate the small rose bud she'd pinned on Becker's jacket before they'd left her house.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The race I was running was an effort to make Claire stop her running long enough to see me. But you know what?" Becker shook her head at the question. "You can't make people do anything. She was never overly cruel, but she never really saw me." Slowly Jolie let go of Becker's hand and put her glass down. Once her hands were free, she ran her fingertips first along the dark brows then downward until they were behind the tall woman's neck. "The first time that happened to me was in a room in Las Vegas standing next to someone with eyes the color of a summer sky."

"As cliché as this may sound, I find that hard to believe. I told you before, I looked at you, and I found a million reasons not to turn away."

The music stopped and they could hear the muffled sounds of the crowd finding their tables. They were getting ready to serve dinner, the main even culminating during dessert. That was when the auction was set to begin. It was something Jolie didn't want to miss but there was something she had to say before they started back.

"My hope is to give you a million reasons to never look away from me, and I'll start the rest of your days with the first and most important." She pressed her lips to Becker's temple and smiled when she saw the smile her action had caused. "I'm going to make sure that before you go out to slay all the corporate dragons, you fight every day that you know that no matter how many of those battles you win or how many you lose - I love you." She kissed the middle of Becker's forehead next. "I love you and I plan to keep loving you until I have nothing left to give." The last promise was followed by a kiss that made Becker pull the small woman as close as possible.

"That is one promise I'll hold you to and I promise the same in return."

"You'd better, or I happen to know a nun with a very large ruler who's promised to help me keep you in line, honey. Now come on, I'm hungry and I have my eye on something in the auction." Jolie reached over for her shoes and laughed when she was placed back on the bench and Becker dropped down to her knees to help put them back on.

The chefs from five different local restaurants put together a meal with a little something for every taste. As Ruth looked around the gathering, she was sure that in ticket sales alone they would be able to finish the projects they had planned for the year, and the auction hadn't even begun yet. If they raised enough with that, her next pipe dream was to transform an old and unused portion of the convent into a library for the children complete with media center and

comfortable places for them to study. For now, they all congregated in the playroom but it didn't give the older children in their care much in the form of quiet when it came to doing schoolwork.

"What are you thinking about over there?" Jolie asked Ruth while Constance was trying to talk Becker into flying back to Vegas within the month for a high stakes craps tournament she was putting together. Her date was listening closely to all the details.

"I'm doing what all good stewards of the church do when it comes to money."

The blonde reached down and placed her hand over the large one lying in her lap. Even when Becker's attention was focused on something else, she had a habit of staying connected to Jolie. So, for most of dinner, they had either shared special looks or Becker was holding her hand.

The meal was now finished for the most part and the staff was busy serving dessert and coffee. Since they were sitting at what could be considered the head table, and had long since finished after having been served first. "What's that?"

"I'm counting heads to see how much money we made. All these smiles around us means we get to finish refurbishing the girls' dormitory and put in a new heating system. If that's true then I can start dreaming pie in the sky projects if we do well with the auction." Ruth leaned in and crooked her finger at Jolie so the young woman would lean in as well. "I'd have traded all that though for the joy of seeing the smile on Becker's face when you two got back from your walk. I don't know what you two talked about but you both look like you're about to burst."

"I don't know why it hasn't occurred to me before now, but you have to tell me if anything about the type of relationship I want to have with Becker makes you uncomfortable. It's very seldom that I find myself sitting in a church pew on Sunday, but I do know the church's position on how I feel about her." Jolie put her free hand on Ruth's and hoped her disappointment wouldn't show on her face if the nun disapproved.

"You want to know a secret?" Becker looked in their direction and Jolie shook her head and squeezed the hand in her lap to give Ruth and her more time. "The church does a lot of good but there is a lot they're still in the dark about. I don't care what sex you are, Jolie, what I care about is that you love my rascal. That's really all that matters to me. Just don't go and tell the bishop my take on things. I'd hate for that to end up in my employment file."

The older blonde kept such a straight face that Jolie just looked at her in shock until she couldn't hold the laughter in any longer. They laughed together until they were leaning against each other trying to catch their breath. "Thank you for that, Ruth."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Becker.

"How we would love for you to go and get us another glass of champagne," answered Ruth with a sweet smile. "Get going, we're not done talking about you yet."

Jolie kissed the pout away and sent Becker on her way. "Thanks again, I don't want to think how

she would have handled it if you had disapproved of what we've found in each other. But Monday will be here soon enough and we'll have the chance to talk about it." There was a man on stage preparing the microphone and podium for the beginning of the auction. "Why don't you tell me what pie in the sky as you put it dreams you have in mind with the proceeds of what's coming?"

They talked about the library Ruth had in mind and where it could be completed on the compound. As they were finishing their conversation Becker made it back from the bar with their drinks just in time to see Ruth make her way to the front of the crowd and the small stage that had been set up.

More than one person close to them smiled watching Jolie as she leaned back and used Becker as a backrest. Item after item went for large donations as Ruth worked the crowd knowing who liked what and more importantly, who could afford more when it was called for. The ones the nun picked on laughed at her good-natured teasing, never giving her any grief in return.

There were a few items still left and Becker had yet to raise her hand to bid on anything, but it didn't surprise Ruth since the businesswoman always bid on the same thing every year. "The next item up for bid is a weekend stay at the Bellagio in Las Vegas in one of the penthouse suites. The package comes with the casino's private plane to get you there and show tickets to O." Another nun from the orphanage helped Ruth hold up the large envelope with the casino logo embossed on the front. "We'll start the bidding at ten thousand."

Becker raised her free hand and tightened her hold on Jolie with the other. Before Ruth could up the bid and ask for more, someone from the back yelled, "Twenty-five."

"I have twenty-five, do I hear thirty?" Ruth didn't need to look anywhere else in the crowd but to Becker. The hand she was looking for went up immediately.

The back and forth went on until Ruth had gotten the price to fifty thousand. It was enough to make the man bidding against Becker put his hand down and set his sights on something else. "I see that Ms. Gaudet will be going back to enjoy the Bellagio's hospitality again this year. The price is fifty, going once," Ruth walked the stage opposite to where Becker was sitting. "Going twice," Ruth looked out once more, knowing there were only a couple more items so her dream of the new library would have to wait. A clear voice spoke up before Ruth was able to close.

"Five hundred thousand dollars."

The surprise bid made Ruth come close to falling off the stage when she turned and headed back to the table at the front. This event had been successful in the past but they had never had anyone offer this kind of money for something that was valued considerably less than the bid. The shocked auctioneer stopped in front of Becker and smiled.

"Becker?" She cocked her head in her equally shocked friend's direction then put her hands up. "Care to go for a little more?"

"I'll concede to the lady," answered Becker sounding as if someone had sucked the air from her lungs since it had been Jolie who had beaten her bid.

"The weekend is yours then, Ms. Clement."

The rest of the auction went on but Becker and Jolie didn't hear a word of it. Becker turned her date around a little so they could talk. "I don't know what to say."

"Tonight, when you take me home, it will be the last time you kiss me goodnight at the door. Because that's going to be our reality, I think we deserve to start with nothing between us."

Not caring who was watching Becker bent her head and kissed the woman who had stolen her heart. "The money was given with no expectations."

"And it was given to Ruth with only one." Jolie put her hand on Becker's face trying to give them a little privacy. She didn't owe Becker an explanation but she offered one anyway. "So that, in what I hope won't be the too distant future, I'll sit on Friday nights, and listen to you read stories in the new B. Gaudet Library."

"Again, I don't know what to say."

"You aren't mad at me are you?" The blue eyes, when Jolie looked at them, held no anger but she had to be sure.

"Honey, I couldn't love you any more right now if I were to try, but give me until tomorrow and I'm sure the feeling will grow and those feelings will continue to grow everyday after that. I would've still felt that way had you kept the money."

Chairs scraped along the ground as people started to go back to the bars and dance floor, now that the dinner and auction were over. If anyone else wanted to talk to Becker or Jolie, one look at them and they left the couple alone not wanting to interrupt the intimate conversation they were enjoying. The band started again, but still the music of the carousel could be heard in the background.

"Tell me one more time," requested Jolie.

"I love you."

"I love you too, honey, and I have to say that I've never been with anyone who can make a girl feel so incredible." The clothes, the shoes, and everything she and Constance had needed to get ready didn't just drop from the sky, and Jolie knew without being told who had provided the means to get them. "Thank you for another wonderful evening."

"It's not over just yet." Becker stood and offered her hand. The blonde accepted thinking they were headed back to the dance floor before going home. She was surprised when instead Becker walked them to the large carousel and waited for the ride to come to a stop. "Someone told me

that I should always make a point of having fun. I think to Ruth it shows better than anything how you feel about a person."

"Why do you think so?"

They came to a stop in front of a white stallion next to a lion, both beautifully painted and restored. With ease, Becker put her hands on Jolie's waist and hoisted her up on the horse sidesaddle. She then straddled the lion and waited for the other riders to find a horse or bench before the switch was thrown to start them in motion again.

"I think it's because, to Ruth, anyone can enjoy an evening together, they can enjoy the day if that's all they have, but to have a relationship that will last requires fun." Both of them braced as the ring started to pick up speed and the wooden animals were set in motion. "In a way she's right. If you don't truly like someone, then there will never be an easy laughter between you, and without that, the love that relationship is built on is not a very solid foundation."

"Then we're off to a good start, baby, because you've done nothing but show me a good time since we met."

"We're just getting started, darlin'."

Their ride home was made in a peaceful silence that spoke of contentment. Since Constance and now Ruth were staying at Jolie's for the night, the blonde suggested they spend the night at Becker's. At the door, the blonde tucked her fingers into Becker's belt to stop her from going any further in.

"You want to know something?" The high heels were kicked off again and Jolie stepped up so she could press herself against Becker. In their time together, Jolie most enjoyed when they stood like this and she could feel the heat the tall woman emitted in abundance.

The way Jolie was looking at her made Becker want to just pick her up and carry her to the bedroom, but the night was going to be about making the small woman happy so she settled for a kiss before answering the question. "Tonight, my love, I want to know everything."

"Oh my, you are a sweet talker." Nimble fingers started on the buttons of Becker's vest then worked it and the coat off where blue eyes watched them fall to the floor. "Don't even think about picking it up," threatened Jolie in a teasing voice.

"You had a question remember?"

The black bow tie came next in a slow and steady pull. "I did indeed." The black silk joined the jacket on the floor. "But I have to tell you, Beck, you are one distracting tall drink of water."

Even though her resolve was to go slow, Becker couldn't wait to put her hands on the woman

driving her insane. She scooped the blonde into her arms and started up the stairs to the master suite. By the time they reached the landing, Jolie had worked her shirt open so she could kiss along the strong neck. "Keep that up and I'm going to drop you before we get much further. I'd hate to stop what we're doing to rush you to the emergency room."

"I don't know. Your mouth to mouth techniques are way above average, honey." She wrapped her lips around Becker's earlobe and smiled around it when the action caused a loud moan. "It's exactly those techniques I'm interested in right now." A deep laugh bubbled out of Jolie when Becker made record time on the last bit of stairs.

The room, like the rest of the house, was devoid of personal pictures and small knickknacks, giving the spaces a cold and stark feel to them. If she hadn't taken the time to learn Becker's heart, Jolie would have taken one look at the house and kept walking. Now she knew what the tall woman needed was someone to give her a sense of family and of belonging to something more than just her job and few friends. It was a task Jolie was looking forward to fulfilling.

Back on her feet, the blonde turned her back on Becker and waited. When nothing happened, she turned her head and smiled. "Could you help me out of this?" The small buttons starting at the middle of Jolie's back came close to being cut open when Becker felt like her fingers would never get them undone. "Don't even think about it," warned Jolie. "I love this dress. You did give it to me after all so take your time."

Jolie laughed again when Becker let out a long and relieved sigh when the last of the buttons succumbed to her maneuvering. "I was just about to buy you another one if these little suckers didn't come loose."

The petite blonde turned around holding her hand to her chest to keep the dress in place. "Sweetheart, tonight you'd better learn that patience might be the word you should keep in mind."

"If we go any slower I might lose my mind," quipped Becker.

The hand came away from Jolie's chest and the strapless sheath she was wearing dropped to the floor leaving her in a very silky looking pair of panties and thigh high hose. "Oh that's entirely possible, Beck. You want to help me up on the bed?" The antique four-poster was a little higher than Jolie thought she could get up on gracefully so she appreciated the strong hands that gave her another boost. Once she was sitting on the edge, she put one of her feet just above Becker's crotch. "Could I talk you into helping me with these?" She pointed to the hose.

It was a challenge to put only the tips of her fingers along the inside of the lacey elastic, but Becker did her best and rolled off the first length of hose. It no sooner than the floor than Jolie's other foot was pressed against her stomach. When the blonde's legs were bare and she was left with only the black panties, she sat up and put her hands on Becker's hips.

"Now for my question. Do you love me?" asked Jolie.

"In every way possible." To Becker, it felt like someone had turned the heat on her skin felt so hot. "But if you need to hear it again, I love you." She reached for Jolie's hands and raised them so she could kiss each palm. "As long as I'm breathing I don't think I'm going to get tired of saying that."

"Good to know honey." She pulled her hands free so she could unfasten Becker's belt. "I ask because I want this to be a forever kind of thing I love you so much." The plain silver buckle with Becker's initials was left hanging to one side when Jolie was finished. "I want your love, your passion, and your desires." The button on the pants came next. "But right now, above all else, I want you."

Becker stepped out of the pants, when they dropped to her ankles, leaving her in just the dress shirt. That easily went next when the blonde grabbed the shirrtails and pulled sending a shower of buttons across the room. She laughed when a dark brow hiked as Becker looked down on her.

"The dress is a one of a kind, and I've never seen the inside of your closet, but I'm guessing there must be at least twenty five more white shirts in there." Jolie did take the time to unbutton the wrist buttons before moving her hands to all the skin she'd uncovered. "Come here, baby."

With a smile on her face, Becker put her knee on the bed and pulled herself up to join the blonde. Lying beside Jolie, the blue eyes swept down the shorter but beautiful body. When she had seen her soon to be lover holding up the dress in the boutique in Las Vegas, Becker couldn't help but appreciate the feminine flair of Jolie's hips and the beautiful bottom. She had never been one to sit and fantasize about how a woman looked naked, but for every norm or rule there had to be an exception. Jolie had been that exception and the fantasy hadn't even been close to the reality.

Long fingers started at the slope of Jolie's shoulder. "Do you know how incredibly beautiful you are?" As if trying to memorize every millimeter of Jolie's body, Becker slowly ran her fingers down her shoulder to the top slope of her right breast. The tall woman hadn't touched anything but the soft skin, but Becker's smiled when she saw the dark pink nipple pucker in anticipation.

"Do you know how hard it's been not to drop to my knees and beg you to let me touch you like this?" Becker followed the curve bypassing the nipple until she had cupped the breast. "You've come to dominate my dreams," they both watched as Becker's thumb softly raked over the hard nub. In reaction, Jolie sucked in a breath that sounded almost like a hiss.

"Baby, I'm begging you not to tease me." Jolie reached up and put her hand over Becker's in an effort to encourage her to relieve her need to be touched.

"I'm not teasing you." The thumb moved back for another swipe at the nipple. "I just figure that I've waited all this time, so I'm going to enjoy every moment of this time with you."

Jolie stopped the fingers from moving with one hand, and with the other moved Becker's head so the businesswoman was looking at her. "This time with me?" The smile the night had affixed to Jolie's face disappeared under the implications of her question.

"A long time from today," Becker moved her hand off Jolie's chest and moved to cover the blonde a little more with her body. "I'm going to look back on my life and there are going to be a lot of happy memories." She bent her head down and kissed Jolie's left cheek. "There's going to be the day I met Ruth," she moved to the other side and kissed the right cheek. "Then the day I met Oscar and we started working on a future that would cement our success." When she moved up to kiss the blonde's forehead Becker's hip pressed against Jolie's sex and the hiss of pleasure broke through the pause. "All those days, as happy as they were to me, will pale in comparison to the first night I made love to the woman I plan to spend the rest of my life with."

"I love you so much." Jolie had to get the words out before pulling the dark head down so she could kiss the poet who was wreaking havoc with her system.

"I love you too, baby, and I want more than anything to show you how much."

Jolie was about to protest when Becker moved off of her but it was only to remove the few barriers left between them. Now that they were naked, Jolie pulled Becker back until almost every inch of her skin was covered by the tall body she could see she was going to learn to crave. Becker looked at her before lowering her head for another kiss making Jolie lose herself in the feeling of her lips. The blonde's head fell back and she moaned when the teasing fingers found their way between her legs.

"Ah...please..." Jolie moaned as Becker's hand moved further down.

The wetness she found made Becker stop and feel the proof of how much Jolie wanted her. "Let me touch you."

"Please, honey, it's me who's begging you now." The thrust of Jolie's hips almost dislodged the tall woman from her spot.

She would have liked to have moved down and put her mouth where her hand was now, but Becker stayed and kissed the soft lips. Along her back, she could feel Jolie's nails as the blonde tried to press them closer together. Through it all, Becker's fingers never stopped their stroking, bringing the point of Jolie's need to a slick pinnacle that came up over and over again to meet the source of her relief.

It didn't take long before Jolie's hips were bucking to meet Becker's hand and her breathing had become ragged. The top of the abyss Becker was leading her to was getting closer, and as much as she wanted to slow down so they could get there together, Jolie couldn't stop. She wanted Becker to put out the fire she had started and the woman holding her so lovingly was pouring everything she felt for the blonde into her touch.

"Oh, baby, don't stop," Jolie said as her hands came up and her fingers threaded through Becker's hair. It felt like her heart was going to beat out of her chest from the pleasure she was feeling and Becker only added to it by never stopping her fingers. They sped up until Jolie's head dropped back to the pillow and her body came to a taut stop as the orgasm rushed through her. "Okay stop."

Becker held her until the panting stopped and the small hands returned to her back and started a circular motion that was meant to sooth both of them. "Are you all right, love?"

Green eyes finally opened and while Jolie wasn't crying, they were a little glossy from emotion. "I'm very all right, or at least I will be in just a minute." Jolie never moved from her spot but she reached down to see if her partner was in as much need of attention as she had been. "Just as soon as," with a wicked smile on her face she slowly dragged her fingers up until she found a very hard and wet spot. Very close to her ear, Jolie heard Becker's breathing hitch and she let out a very noticeable groan. "What's the matter, baby?" She kicked up the pressure a bit.

"Darlin', from where I'm sitting, there's not a damn thing wrong," it took some effort, but Becker got the quip out.

"Then let's do...something...oh Jesus." The hand between her legs bled all the teasing out of Jolie's voice and it was all she could do to concentrate on bringing Becker the same pleasure. "Something about that." If her body thought to protest the exercise so soon after finishing, Jolie put it aside and enjoyed the sensations Becker brought out in her as she returned the favor.

All the talk between them died away as they reveled in the feel of skin moving against skin and the orgasms built. Just as they both reached the edge, Becker pressed her lips to Jolie's neck and closed her eyes. In the past, this was where she started thinking of leaving and distancing herself from her bed partner, but with this precious blonde she thought of making room in her closet for Jolie to move in.

"Thank you, my love," whispered Becker. She was still lying on Jolie and could feel the comforting hands rubbing circles on her back.

"For what?"

"I've never felt so loved."

Jolie pressed a kiss to Becker's temple and smiled. "Just wait, baby, it's only going to get better with time, but I know what you mean. It's never been like this for me." She rolled with the tall woman as they changed positions so Jolie was able to rest her head on Becker's chest. From her new spot, it gave the florist a clear view of the door that led to the closet.

"What are you thinking about?" Becker brushed back some locks of blonde hair behind Jolie's ear.

"I was thinking about something you told me." She turned her head so her chin was resting on her folded hands and her eyes looked into the sparkling blue ones so close to her. "If you found a million reasons not to look away from me, then I want a million nights just like this one. I don't want you to ever let me go."

"Let you go," Becker pulled her closer and looked at her in the most loving way she could

muster. "Not ever, my love."

"You know what?"

The question had been put to her more than once in the time they'd been together, but it never failed to bring a smile to Becker's face. "What?"

"Other people may give thanks for a million other things, but I have to tell you - I sure am thankful that you love to play craps."

Becker rolled them over again with a mischievous gleam in her blue eyes. "That may be true, but let me show you what other things I love to play." The only response the tall woman got was a groan of pleasure.

When Becker's hand reached its destination, Jolie looked up at her and laughed. "Oh yeah, folks, we have a winner."

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Epilogue

February 2005

"Then what?"

"Then you roll until you get the same number you set before you roll a seven. It's easy I'm telling you."

Oscar looked up from the contract he was reading and shook his head. While he had been back to Vegas a couple of times during the year, this was the first time Jolie and Becker were going back since they'd met. The happy couple had stood in front of friends and family a couple of months prior to declare their love for each other in a ceremony presided over by Ruth, but they hadn't been able to go on a honeymoon. They had saved that for the anniversary of their peculiar meeting, in the hotel where they had struck their equally peculiar bargain.

"And you win money doing this?" asked Jolie. It was pitch black outside the window since they were flying over Lake Mead signaling they were close to their destination. The blonde leaned closer to Becker and winked at Oscar and her second cousin Sabrina. The two had met at a Clement family gathering and the middle-aged blonde had turned Oscar's world off kilter from their first conversation.

"Plenty, don't you worry. Besides, I'm thinking there might be some things other than the gaming tables that will interest me." Dark brows wiggled making the three other passengers laugh.

"You're damned right, lover, this weekend cost me plenty so I want to see you in the bed more than on the gaming floor. You may be a whale, Gaudet, but I'm your Captain Ahab."

The wheels hit the tarmac smoothly causing them all to look out at the strip full of neon and lights. It was late but the streets were still teeming with people walking Las Vegas Boulevard catching the sights and a little action.

"Have fun you two and we'll call you tomorrow for dinner," said Jolie as she hugged first Sabrina then Oscar.

"Make that we might call you tomorrow for dinner," added Becker, getting a slap in the arm for her teasing. They headed from the airport to the Bellagio in separate cars, and each couple soon found kissing their traveling partner much more entertaining than people watching.

Jolie finally looked out the window again when the car stopped to make the left into the property. The large hotel was lit up but the large lake was black for the evening. She accepted the bellman's hand to get out of the car and was surprised to find a familiar face.

"We meet again, Joe." The New Yorker smiled at the blonde as his gesture of help turned into a handshake. "How are you?"

"I'm great and it's nice to see you as well." He dropped her hand when Becker's tall form appeared and he smiled. "Ms. Gaudet, it's nice to see you as well."

"Honey, this is Joe. We met the last time I was here." It wasn't often Jolie compared Becker to Claire but when things like this happened, Jolie couldn't help but dwell on the differences. Had it been Claire walking up to this situation she would've made some move to show possession. Becker though extended her hand and smiled.

Initially the florist believed Becker's passiveness to be a form of indifference. At least Jolie had assumed that until Becker explained that there was one certainty in her life that defined her behavior. It was her unshakable belief in how Jolie felt about her and how she felt in return. Because she believed in the strength of their love, she would never embarrass Jolie by treating her like a piece of property.

"It was Joe who told me to walk over and watch the fountain show the last time I arrived." The petite woman laughed when Becker shook the bellhop's hand again and patted him on the shoulder.

"Thanks for giving her the recommendation," Becker smiled when a small hand slipped into hers.

"You're very welcome, Ms. Gaudet. If I may, I'd suggest you head back over there now." He saluted them before walking away to deal with their luggage. His opinion of Jolie rose even higher after running into her again. This time around if she had ignored him, considering who she was with, he would have understood. Before stepping through the door that lead to the service elevator, Joe turned and saw the silhouette of the two kissing. As much as both Becker and Jolie loved the fountain coming to life, it was lost on them now.

Jolie awoke the next morning to an empty bed and sighed thinking her partner had succumbed to either the lure of the tables or the lure of work. She came close to kicking herself when she saw the tall woman walking in wearing one of the casino's robes and carrying a tray.

"Forgive me?"

Becker looked up surprised to find green eyes looking back. Usually it took dynamite to pry the blonde out of bed. "For what? Did you do something horrible in the time it took me to get the door?"

"I thought you were downstairs shooting craps or on the phone." The aroma of coffee enticed her to sit up when Becker handed her a cup. It was followed by an equally enticing sight when Becker dropped the robe and crawled in next to her.

"And leave you alone with all the cheese Danish? I think not, Mrs. Gaudet." She motioned for Jolie to take a sip so she could take the cup back. "I know we never talk about this because you think it makes me uncomfortable," Becker came closer and took Jolie in her arms. "But I'm not her and I never will be. There won't ever be anything in this world that will capture my attention like you do, love." The kiss that followed was as gentle as her sentiment. "Especially when we're somewhere like this room and I have you all to myself."

"Craps, I'll have to admit, has been lucky for both of us," Jolie reached up to run her fingers through the dark hair. "And you can play all you want if the result always brings you back here," she teased before her teeth bit down gently on the nipple closest to her. "Thank you for saying all that though. Sometimes I pinch you in the mornings when you're sleeping just to convince myself you're real and I'm not dreaming."

"Shouldn't you be pinching yourself?"

The blonde laughed as she sat up to straddle Becker's waist, the sheet falling away as she did. "I could," her hands glided up her body to her own breasts. She cupped them as if presenting them to her wife as a gift before she pinched both nipples. Becker's hands tightened in reflex on Jolie's hips at the petite woman's actions. Just as slowly, Jolie let go and moved her hands to cover Becker's breasts. "But it's much more fun to pinch you."

The coffee and plate of pastry sat forgotten as the young couple found other things to nibble on. By the time they were finished, the digital clock beside the bed read ten after four in the afternoon. Jolie saw it before closing her eyes again and snuggling closer to Becker. This was how they spent most of their Sundays whenever they could, and would continue to do so if given a choice.

"What are you thinking about?" Becker lightly scratched Jolie's back expecting to hear her start purring she looked so contented.

"Walking."

Becker's soft laugh shook Jolie a bit. "Walking?"

"Sure, I'd like to walk around for a little while and maybe find something for Ruth, and if we go to see Huey and Connie tomorrow we can't go empty handed." Jolie wrapped her hands around Becker's neck when her partner sat up intending to carry the blonde to the shower.

"The best gift you can bring Ruth is a roll of quarters for the slots. She must have missed the part of the training where they mentioned gambling is a sin." She laughed when Jolie pulled a bit of her hair. "Okay it's not a sin but I don't often see a plethora of nuns in here screaming for the red sevens to hit."

"I'm sure we'll find something to bring her. After all, aren't you the one who told me Vegas has a way of providing what everyone needs?"

Becker's broad back protected Jolie from the spray of the shower when her teaser put her down. "I was in need of someone to fall madly in love with." She lathered her hands before placing them on Jolie's shoulders. "I was also in need of a beautiful woman to romance," Becker's hands moved down her arms then took the same path back up. "And I was in need of someone to share the rest of my life with." Jolie moved closer until they were pressed together when Becker's hands landed on her bottom. "I needed all that, I came here, and I found you."

"It was more like we found each other, honey." At least once a day since they had started seeing each other, Jolie looked up into clear blue eyes and found her definition of adoration. Becker, like no other person in her life, made her feel loved, adored and appreciated in a way that overwhelmed the blonde. "I love you so much and I love how you talk to me. You, my love, are such a gift."

"I love you too and I promise if you're good you can unwrap me later," teased Becker. The best part of having Jolie in her life was how much they laughed together. "Come on, I promised you a walk, and I'll also promise we'll do our best to find something interesting."

The mall area of the casino was packed with last minute Valentine's Day shoppers, mostly men trying to find something to appease upset wives. They walked, holding hands and window shopping, stopping every so often to look at some of the unique displays the shops had set up to lure in high rollers.

One stop they made was in front of the boutique where Jolie had been standing when Becker stopped in to talk to her. The blonde could almost see a ghost of herself standing in front of the mirror holding up an expensive dress and discovering her knight in shining armor. It was that brief conversation that had forever changed Jolie's life for the better, and the memory of that always put a smile on the petite woman's face.

"Want to go in and take a look?"

Jolie shook her head. "I already found what I was looking for."

"Sweet, baby, but come on. You'd look good in that," Becker pointed to a simple green dress on a mannequin at the center of the store. "Think you could dance in that?"

"I don't think a magician could jitter-bug in that."

"We're doing that in jeans tomorrow, but tomorrow night, I promise all slow dances."

Interested gray eyes watched as Jolie leaned against her partner and ran a finger along her cheek. They looked like two people in love even if you couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Are you asking me out, Ms. Gaudet?"

"Most definitely. Interested?" The only answer Becker got was being pulled into the store by her belt.

If the first time Jolie had come in, she was met with indifference, this time the staff fell over themselves to wait on her. "Did you send a memo down or something?"

"I'd have to guess Constance did. She usually..." Becker didn't finish when someone stepped in front of her and stood staring at Jolie.

"You think you treaded up? You didn't. How you got here makes you nothing but a whore." The blonde just looked at her tormentor in shock not saying anything.

"Walk away now and you don't lose any teeth," threatened Becker.

"I see, when they belong to someone else it's okay for you to move in on them, but when they're with you they're off limits." Claire dug in her pocket and pulled out some bills. "Then again I forgot how this works with you, Jolie," she slammed a hundred dollar bill on the counter. "I'll give you a hundred bucks for a night with your wife."

The blonde's ex-lover looked at Becker as she made the offer and smiled. Her friend and business partner Wendy had been more than willing to take Jolie's place when things didn't work out between them, and had enjoyed the large cash settlement Claire had come with. That was a year ago but now her traveling companion had talked her into coming back to Vegas to rebuild the money they had blown in setting up the bar and in having a good time. No matter how much fun they had in and out of bed, it became abundantly clear to Claire that Wendy was nowhere near Jolie's league.

She had given up the one person in her life who had believed in her and had loved her no matter her faults. At first, Claire had cried over it then it had been easier to blame the woman who had

stolen Jolie away from her. The woman who was glaring at her now looking like she was going to pulverize Claire.

"What do you say, bitch?" In her alcohol-induced fog, Claire figured if she could talk Becker into a fight and win, she would also win back Jolie. "What's twenty-four hours to you?"

Jolie was about to pull Becker out of the store, since she looked like the veins in her neck were about to explode they were so visible, when she watched the fist coming flying almost as if it were in slow motion. In the same slow time frame, she watched Claire's head fly back and her body start to go down from the force of the blow. She detested violence for any reason but at that moment, she looked at the highly agitated Becker and felt her heart race at the sight. No one had ever talked to her like Becker did and no one had ever fought for her.

The florist sprang into action when Becker moved in to hit the prone woman again. "Whoa there, honey," she put a hand over Becker's fist and one on her cheek, "I think she got the message." The hand she was covering relaxed and the tall woman just looked at her as she tried to get her ragged breathing under control.

"I'd apologize but I can't," Becker admitted honestly.

"I'm not asking you to." She moved her hand to the back of Becker's neck and pulled a little in an effort to get it to bend. Becker complied and was treated to a kiss full of passion. "I don't want it to become a habit, but you looked incredibly sexy fighting over my honor." Jolie kissed her again before moving to stand over Claire. The bruise next to her left eye was already starting to swell. "Just for future reference, sunshine, that's the response you should have when someone offers you money to sleep with your wife."

"Does that mean you're still my wife?"

"I think I stopped being that to you long before we came here, and we were both to blame for that. I know we aren't ever going to be more than a memory to each other, but I'm married to Becker now and nothing you do or think to do is going to change that."

"It was the money wasn't it?" Her head was still swimming but Claire sat up.

"The money was so important to me that I gave it away. Actually it was her eyes," she looked back to see the blue orbs looking at her as if gauging whether or not Claire needed to be smacked again.

"Hell, Jolie, if blue turned you on so much I'd have gotten contacts."

Two strong arms wrapped around her middle and Jolie's face softened at the gesture. "The color is beautiful to me, but that's not what's important." Jolie lifted her hand and pressed her palm to Becker's face. "She sees me and believes in me. Any relationship built on that, no matter how it started, will last for an eternity. I love Becker because it's the easiest thing in the world, and I would love her even if she only had one dollar to her name."

From her spot on the floor, Claire watched them leave hand in hand. Jolie had always been a beautiful woman, but she was radiant in love, and Claire wanted the chance to hit Becker for being the person on the receiving end of those feelings. In hindsight, a million on Becker's part had been a bargain for the treasure she got in return.

Jolie stopped when the maitre d' opened the doors to the balcony overlooking the lake in front of the casino. The table, just like the year before, was the only one set out there, but this year, it was surrounded by bouquet after bouquet of Stargazer Lilies. The flowers weren't perhaps the norm for Valentine's Day, but they were her favorites and considering her profession, it wasn't often that Becker was able to surprise her with a bouquet of anything.

There was a beautifully wrapped box sitting on the table and Jolie shook her finger at her mate. "I thought you said no presents."

"I know how much you love flowers, and since I would never order flowers from anyone but you, I thought just this once I could surprise you with a gift of flowers."

"Flowers?"

"Flowers that you can put in the shop and they'll always be in bloom just like my love for you."

It took effort for Jolie not to make a face. If there was one thing she detested more than anything, it was artificial flowers. She moved to the box and lifted the lid. Inside sat two smaller versions of the Chihuly flowers like the ones in the lobby of the Bellagio. One was blue and the other green.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

Soft music was being piped in so Becker took advantage and led Jolie to a clear spot on the deck. "If something happened and you were never able to tell me that with words, I'd still know how much you love me. You show me in every action, every touch, and in every look."

They had spent the rest of the afternoon and night after meeting up with Claire in their room simply enjoying their own company. Then the next morning they had flown out with Oscar and Sabrina to enjoy the day with Huey and his wife Connie. This time though the party had been more fun than the blonde ever remembered having. Becker as promised had worn jeans and danced every dance with her until Jolie had begged for mercy. The day had ended with the delivery of the beautiful green dress they had gone in to look at, and Jolie almost suggested they stay in again when she felt the hot fingers on her back as Becker helped her with the zipper.

"I want to always tell you, baby." The words to the song they were dancing to were Italian, but Jolie got lost in Andre Bocelli's voice and in Becker's eyes. "I found you here and now I want to share every last sunset I have with you. At least a million of them."

"Like you told me, we found each other here and a million won't be enough." As Becker lowered her head to kiss the woman she loved, the fountains came to life and the music they had first heard together started to play.

"You're right, darling, no matter how many, it won't be enough for us, and tonight I'll start by giving you a million reasons to think so." Jolie finished her promise and accepted the kiss Becker was offering. Their beginning may not have been auspicious, but their ending would be like any other for people in love, and it was that happy ever after the blonde was looking forward to.

The End

Comments to: terrali20@yahoo.com
