

# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 1

### Chapter 1

Alex sat on the beach, curled up in a large beach towel, for what seemed like an eternity. Dusk had been a while in the painting and she was happy to be back on familiar grounds watching the creation. The sea air was clean and slightly crisp and there was just enough of a breeze to make interesting white caps dance on top of the water. The gulls keep endlessly busy swooping here and there catching whatever was available within their beak's reach. Alex found herself mesmerized as she regarded the scenario being played out before her. She observed the sea deposit a clam shell here, a bit of seaweed there and some piece of discarded plastic somewhere else along the long expanse of sand. Then she watched in awe as the sea decided not to leave all those gifts on the beach and swept in again reclaiming half of her treasures. *Yes, Alex decided, the sea is a selfish lover, she only leaves bits and pieces of herself on the shore and even at that tends to renege on her offerings as she tidies up again by taking what was originally hers back into her depths before the trinkets have a chance to be confiscated and adored by anyone else.* She watched as the sky turned from a pale blue matching the color of her eyes to a soft peach and finally to a bright crimson mixed with lavender. Then the sun began its daily decent to kiss the sea goodnight. Alex never tired of watching this play out as the sun, shimmering with tentacles reached downward approaching her lover, the sea, for their evening ritual. One could almost hear the sizzle as the celestial body and the earthly mass came within touching distance of each other. If you looked closely, you could see the sea reaching up as the sun was reaching down. You

could see the heat that generated between the two and then, with a quickness that seemed to come all too soon, the brief encounter would be over and the sea would be alone again until the next sunset. Alex gazed into the area where the sunset had just played and she felt a small twinge of melancholy.

She felt akin to the sea in many respects. She was a loner and had been for a very long time. There were times she had reached for the comfort of another's touch or for the look in the eyes of another that would start her creative juices flowing and let her forget the cares of the everyday world. But those times were few and far between and for the past three years she had totally shut herself off from any kind of emotional entanglement, even if it were only a brief encounter. As the old saying went, *once bitten, twice shy*. She had had the bite and didn't intend to relive the pain in any near future. She would be quite content working on her dreams alone. The vision had started alone and she would see it through to the end.

She loved sitting on the beach, watching the walkers, the runners, the volleyball players and even the lovers as they all enjoyed the hospitality of the sand and the sea. But this stretch of beach was different. It was much more secluded than the beaches a little north of here or a little south. This was her own private cove and very few ventured here. She liked it that way. The seclusion suited her. Occasionally, someone would come for a swim, a walk or to surf, but usually the beach was deserted. As she looked out toward the water, she did notice several people had found their way to her beach this evening. There was a couple out for a jog along the ocean's edge followed by what she assumed to be their dog. There were even a few surfers still catching the medium height waves that seemed to regularly grace this part of the beach and which she, in happier years, would have been glad to have jumped in and rode with them. Surfing had always been one of her favorite sports, right up there with beach volleyball which she was quite good at because of her lithe body and exceptional height. She had to admit to herself that these recreations were part of what kept her young and kept her coming back to California. The tall athletic woman had realized years ago that being raised a California beach brat made it extremely difficult for her to fit into more stringent areas for more than a month or two at a stretch. She always yearned to get out of the rigid and back to the beach. Out of the power suit and back to the bathing suit or cutoffs. Nothing ever felt as good on her feet as nothing or if she had to, Birkenstocks or Reeboks.

Again her eyes drifted onto the area closest to the water and there she saw two women with a small pail between them seemingly digging for clams. The young women had first caught her attention when she heard one of them let out a squeal of joy at the prospect of her first find. From that point on Alex had found it hard to tear her eyes away from the odd couple. One of the women was thin and very frail looking, clad in designer cutoffs and a midi-blouse. She actually looked rather out of place handling the small shovel, digging in the wet sand and yet trying to keep from getting sandy, as if that were an option when one was clamming. The wind had only slightly messed up her coiffed hair and she looked more like a model who had come onto the beach for a photo shoot than someone digging for their dinner. Her companion, on the other hand, seemed to be very much at home with the chore at hand and had no trouble throwing down her small garden hoe, as her foot found what it had been so painstakingly wiggling and searching for in the sand. She had more the look of the girl next door, someone who would be easy to get to know and willing to become friends with new neighbors. She also seemed to be having a

really good time playing in the sand. All of a sudden she was kneeling down on the wet beach using her hands to finish her final descent on the solitary clam.

"I know what I'm having for dinner," Alex heard her say as her words were carried on the breeze.

There was a childlike quality in her voice that touched a spot deep within Alex as she continued to study the two friends from a safe distance. The young woman waved the clam like a victory flag high above her head before relinquishing it to the pail. Then she wiggled her feet in the sand again, searching for her next victim. The successful clammer had worn white cutoffs to the beach so this had to be a new experience for her and perhaps that atoned for the enthusiasm. Her shorts were now taking on an ashen tone, none to the dismay of the wearer. Even from this distance Alex could see the pure joy on the face of the young woman. Watching the playful expressions dart across the woman's face, Alex continued to stare at the two friends and found herself wishing she had a friend to share that kind of happiness with.

The sky was beginning to darken but there was a full moon coming into plain view and it was scattering rays of light that danced on the woman's hair making it sparkle like gold. It had been a long time since someone's voice had turned Alex's head and she was content to pull her towel up closer around her and simply watch them play. Perhaps, she thought to herself, *I could walk innocently by and see how they were doing with their . . . NOT . . .* she decided. I'll just sit and watch from a distance, it's much safer. She watched the two until the blonde woman seemed to have had her fill of playing and the bucket held enough clams to make a small feast for two. As they walked away from the shore line and toward the place where she was sitting, Alex felt her breath catch in a short quick gasp and she wondered how a stranger could have elicited such an emotion within her. She watched the silhouettes with a heavy heart, as their laughter was being carried on the wind. She turned her head away as they came closer to the spot where she sat and kept it turned even as they passed close enough to have seen the face of the woman who laughed like an angel. After they passed, she gave them enough time to get about half way up the stairs before turning back around to catch another glimpse of the small blonde-haired imp of a woman. She thought she saw the golden head sweep as in a turn, turning back to face the street, as Alex lifted her head toward them and watched their shadows disappear. *Alone again*, Alex thought, *perhaps for the best.*

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Samantha and Suzanne had decided -- well, it was actually more like Samantha had pulled Suzanne's arm (and her legs and every other part that would take a pulling) to go clam digging on the spur of the moment, simply because the tide was going to be out and the opportunity was there. It had been a hectic day and Samantha really just wanted to unwind a little. The vivacious blonde really liked her job, as much as one could like sitting for up to eight hours a day trying to decipher what inconsiderate dictators decided to pass off as understandable clinic notes. Being a medical transcriptionist she kept telling herself was merely a rung in the ladder she was climbing while working her way up to being a best-selling author. At least it kept her fingers nimble, food on the table and a roof over her head. It also allowed her to live pretty much anywhere she chose and she had just recently chosen Laguna Beach. She knew that artists always had to pay the price of job loathing while striving for the goal of "loving what you do for a living" and this job was

really not all that bad. Anyway, here they were on the beach at the end of the day and she was going to make the most of it. There was a beautiful sunset in the distance and she felt blessed to be here with a good friend. She knew full well that Suzanne would have rather gone to dinner and a movie but she wanted to get some fresh air for a change and going clamming sounded like a great idea.

Samantha told Suzanne she had found just the right place for their outing. It was just a little way south of town. They drove to the cliff, got their gear, took off their shoes and starting walking toward the steep wooden steps that lead to the beach. As they passed in front of the old warehouse Sam looked at it in amazement because of the transformation that had taken place in the months since she had last seen the building, even the surrounding grounds were now pruned and manicured.

Samantha's mind began to wander as they began their descent.

"Be careful Suz, these steps are steep and a little rickety," she warned her friend.

"Don't worry. I can manage. I lived here first, remember?" Suzanne answered, smiling.

"Yeah, but I don't think the beach saw much of you," Samantha smiled back.

Samantha had only been in Laguna for a couple months but found the small beach town quite to her liking. The people were friendly but not nose-y and you could join in sand activities up near Coast Highway, surf if you knew how or find your own secluded piece of beach and just watch the waves. She had happened upon this cove months ago while visiting Suz and before she had finally made up her mind to move down here and away from family for a while. She had been out walking one evening and fell in love with the serenity of the place. Laguna itself was small and quite most of the time but this was like something out of a fairytale. She had been drawn to the cove because of its privacy. The only bit of civilization other than the stairs leading down to the beach was the huge old warehouse they had just passed up on the cliff. On her first visit to the area she had found nothing but debris scattered all around the building including what was left of hundreds of windows. The palms and shrubs were overgrown like the forest in the Sleeping Beauty story. Now it seemed as though someone else also saw potential on this barren strip of beach because the old warehouse was being turned from an eyesore into what looked like a magic castle --- especially if you were looking through the eyes of someone as romantic as Samantha. *Castles in the air* -- she thought to herself -- *magical castles in the air -- rising from ruins to float above the ocean near a mystical land . . . Ah . . . I could go on and on . . . I love the mystery of this place. Okay, Samantha get your mind back to the real world!*

With that she almost tripped on the next to the last step but at least the slight jump she had to make landed her directly into the soft, white sand.

"Come on Suzanne," Samantha chided her friend as she ran through the powder-like sand toward the ocean's edge, "Let's get started. You know how to use the shovel, don't ya?"

"Of course I know How to use the shovel. It's just a question of whether or not I want to. I let you drag me down here but does that mean I have to break a nail and get dirty, too?"

"This is supposed to be fun. Tell me you understand that concept. Keep in mind that I told you I would do all the cooking and all the cleaning up if you would just *pretend* like you're having fun with me, ok?"

"Yeah, okay, Sammie -- let's see, you find the air bubbles and I'll start digging. Fair enough?"

"Great. Hey, look, here's a whole slew of them, it looks like someone dragged a heavy wagon or something through here so we really shouldn't have to dig too deep. Ohhhhh, look Suzanne, I think I see one actually sticking out of the sand."

The expression in Samantha's voice was so innocent and juvenile. Suzanne loved being around her friend who seemed to find joy in absolutely everything. Samantha seemed to have a way of bringing the sunshine with her even on a gloomy day. That was a rare gift and she was glad they had become friends in college.

Samantha quickly dropped to her knees forgetting all about the shovel and began using her hands as digging tools. The wet sand would separate between her fingers and allow parts of the ocean to fill up the small well she was so desperately making on her way to her prize. In no time she was rewarded with one of the largest clams she had ever seen.

"Thank you Poseidon! Gifts from the sea -- I know what I'm having for dinner!" Samantha giggled with joy.

"Yeah, Sam, but one clam does not a clambake make. You'd better get those happy little fingers of yours digging more." Suzanne laughingly told her friend. "Just be careful not to injure any of those digits, you need them to be in perfect working order within the next couple of weeks. Remember, we're getting that new account from the clinic opening up, actually, that's it right behind you there on the beach," Suzanne said as she pointed toward the cliff and the newly refurbished warehouse.

"Is it opening that soon? That's it? That's the clinic? The old warehouse? Wow!! I thought it was going to be another month before they had everything ready to go. I just hope the new therapists speak English and know how to enunciate. Maybe we should give them all a free lesson in how to dictate, what do you think?"

"I think you'd better just adjust your earphones, Sam, and concentrate. Dictators seem to come in one basic variety -- Conceited. You know -- I do everything right -- what makes you think I can't talk into a silly machine...."

"Yeow -- Suz, forget about 'em for now, here's some more clams. Come on -- help me get these," she said as she smiled up at her friend and pulled at her pant legs. "We are going to have a feast tonight!" Samantha stated.

"Sam, you'd think you never did this before." Suzanne chided her friend.

"I haven't -- I'm a novice -- I've read about clamming and I've eaten clams, but I've never actually dug them up for dinner." Sam retorted.

Suzanne glanced around the beach to find that they were almost entirely alone save for one solitary figure up by the base of the cliff. "Hey, Sam, I think you've gained someone's attention," She whispered as she looked over in the direction of the soon-to-be clinic. "You think you might lower your voice just an octave or two so people won't think we're crazy out here?"

"No, I'm not going to lower my voice." Samantha answered, "I'm on the beach. I'm having a good time. She can come join us if she'd like to or she can sit there and watch. I don't care. I don't know her. She doesn't know me. This is a free beach and we are allowed to laugh!" Samantha looked over in the direction Suzanne had pointed out only to spot one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. She looked like something out of a romance novel, even sitting on the sand with her arms wrapped around her knees, totally wrapped up in a beach towel. Even with the distance between them Sam could tell that the woman must have been close to six feet tall. Her features were very angular and she had an intensity that seemed almost to be chiseled on her face. She also had a look of melancholy and Sam felt a slight twinge of sympathy for the woman. *She looks lost and lonely*, Sam thought to herself and for some reason that touched her heart and she had to look away to keep from staring. She quickly placed her attention back to the chore at hand and helped her friend pick up the treasures the sea had so diligently supply them. *Oh, boy, steamers, and chowder this is a feast in the making.*

"Look over here, Suz, I think I just hit paydirt!" The two friends busied themselves scraping and digging in the sand, Samantha on all fours and Suzanne trying her best not to get too dirty. By the time they were finished their pail was quite full and Sam, at least, was physically spent.

"Come on," Samantha finally stated, "I think we have enough to make quite a meal."

With that the two friends picked up their digging tools and the pail full of dinner. They started their trek back toward the stairs and the cliff. Samantha made sure not to stare at the lone figure as they got closer to her, she didn't want to make the woman feel uncomfortable. Samantha was not the shy type, but for some reason she was afraid of making eye contact with this lonely looking person. They quickly passed the area where the woman was and then when they were half way up the stairs Samantha turned back around and gave a quick glance in the direction of the solitary figure still sitting on the sand. *Hair as dark as midnight*, she mused to herself, *a solitary dark figure cloaked in mystery --- okay Samantha that's enough imagination for one night!* As she was turning her head back to face her friend, she had the distinct feeling that the woman on the beach was also looking up the stairs at her. *Oh, Samantha, there you go again with that imagination of yours. Silly girl!!* Sam shook off the feeling as she caught up with Suzanne -- they were off to make a captain's feast!

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Alex had been watching the two women leave her beach as her mind began wandering back to when she first started laying the foundation for what was finally playing out for her in the next week or two.

Her great adventure had begun almost directly out of school. Alex had graduated at the top of her class, summa cum laude and had been offered positions at quite a few clinics and hospitals. Marge Silkton, one of her mother's best friends, owned a company whose main agenda was helping other physical therapy clinics, sports medicine clinics, gyms and doctors' offices grow into multi-million dollar enterprises. Marge knew how good Alex was at organizing, problem solving and getting situations handled. She had watched her since she was a kid organizing the neighborhood children in campaigns like paper drives and aluminum can collections. She told Alex that she needed that kind of enthusiastic new blood in her company. Alex knew that Marge thought of her like a daughter and the woman held a special place in the young woman's heart as well. Knowing that Alex could really make a place for herself in the company, Marge tempted her with the promise of a junior partnership with more money than she could possibly make just working in a clinic, working for a hospital or even starting her own small clinic in the San Diego area. She offered her travel, an expense account and the luxury of having no time clock and no set hours. The benefits were astronomical and any 21-year-old fresh out of college would have been foolish to pass up such an offer. Alex was anything but foolish.

Her parents being quite accomplished people in their own rights wanted to make sure their daughter had all the opportunities they could afford her. Being an only child she had everyone's attention and grew up among a diverse group of her family's friends. She had decided well into high school that she wanted to do something humanitarian for a living and had narrowed it down by the time she applied for USC. She would be a therapist and help those who had trouble helping themselves, she would be a crusader for the sick and weak, helping them to regain whatever it was they had lost. This was a fine and noble idea but she found the opportunity being offered to her by Marge a much easier way to begin her journey. Off she went to conquer the world and make it a better place whenever she could. Such innocent dreams, such high ideals, but she swore to herself that she would not lose track of them while delving into the real world.

Marge didn't throw her to the wolves directly, she took her under wing and slowly showed her the ropes. Beginning with lunches and dinners with the top execs of the various companies Marge had on her unique list of clients. Alex watched, she listened and she learned. She learned how to approach the clients and how to convince them beyond a shadow of a doubt that they needed the equipment or expansion plan she was offering them. She learned how to explain to her patrons that by simply purchasing some new machines, getting their employees extra training and by offering some not so conventional types of treatments that they could increase their businesses ten fold. She was sure to explain to the customers that her company was the best company to handle the job and she made many enemies from among her competition by stealing companies right out from under their noses. Being a quick study, as Marge already knew she was, it wasn't long before Alex was on her own with her own set of clients and the list just kept growing by leaps and bounds.

Of course along the way she continued to increase her own knowledge by continually taking courses, mostly in some of the newer esoteric therapies that were slowly beginning to trickle into

the world of sports medicine and physical therapy. Her love had always been delving a little into the occult and the new therapies seemed a good place to indulge her voracious appetite. It was also easy to keep in good shape what with having to not only explain how to operate the new exercise equipment but to show how each piece worked. She was constantly on one machine or another, a Badger knee machine or a Cybex, showing customers how to use the new stationary bikes and treadmills as well as the free weights and of course there was always the newest and biggest Nautilus equipment that needed demonstrating. Being in shape was never a problem working for Have It All (Marge's company).

Alex never minced words with her clients and when she spoke people seemed to listen. She always felt that actions spoke louder than words and let her physical demonstrations of their new items speak for themselves. She made it all look so easy -- "See," she would tell the client, "Anyone can use this." *Yeah*, she remembered thinking, *anyone who has practiced on it for months like I have.* Making the machines look good was part of her job and her added benefit was a body that belonged in a sports magazine. She liked teaching the classes, watching people get all excited and wrapped up in a new idea or new discipline. She felt like she was making some small contribution to the world at large and that had always been important to Alex. So what if she spent her days and more than some of her evenings setting up machines, teaching the classes and showing the new therapists or business owners the ins and outs of management as well as just plain old common sense on how to run a healthy, profit making clinic. She was one of the best when it came to convincing some tight wad to go out on a limb. And she was the first to be thanked when their businesses blossomed. The perks became too numerous to count and Alex had always been glad she had taken the offer Marge so graciously had handed her on a silver platter.

But tonight for some strange reason Alex was looking on the darker side of being such an entrepreneur. *Sure*, Alex thought to herself, *I do my job really well. My competition hates me. I get gifts and bonuses up the butt. My clients are loyal and send me more referrals than I could ever handle by myself but I always . . . Always . . . seem to come back to California -- Alone.*

The night was in full swing by this time and the moon was cascading light down on the ocean. One last look and it was time to go back up to the clinic. *I really need to stop thinking of it as just a clinic. I need to start thinking of it as home. It's everything I've ever wanted. I have the entire top floor with half of my windows looking over the ocean and the other half looking over the streets of Laguna. What a fairyland. I should be the happiest woman in the world. I am happier now. Maybe not the happiest I've ever been or could be, but I am happy. I worked hard for this and spent many nights in cities I didn't want to be in. I spent many nights with people I didn't really want to be around and now I have this, my dream. Goddamn it -- I Am Happy!*

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"Okay Sam, here's the pail, there's the kitchen. I'm going to go shower first while you start dinner."

"You can't honestly say you didn't have a good time, now can you?" Samantha questioned her friend.



"No, I guess I can't *honestly* say that. It was different and it was fun, in an earthy kind of way. But I really would have rather gone out to dinner and to a movie."

"Yeah . . . I know you would have but this is going to taste soooooo much better and you can watch a video while I clean up. Such a deal!"

Suzanne felt right at home in Sam's apartment, they had known each other since college and it was good to have Sam here in Laguna with her. They had kept in touch first by phone and mail and then by the Internet. When the doctor Sam had been working for decided that it was better business to bring his dictation into his office, Samantha decided it was time to quit. She hadn't been that fond of the doctor having to see him on a daily basis was not at all appealing. That afforded Suzanne the ideal situation and made it easy for her to talk Sam into moving to California.

"Hey, where'd ya put the towels," Suzanne yelled from the bathroom to the perky blonde in the kitchen.

"Oh, gosh, I forgot to put them away. I did the laundry yesterday and haven't had a chance to put them in the closet. Here, let me get you one."

Samantha waltzed over to the basket in the living room and picked up two towels and two washcloths.

"Here Suz, put mine up, too, okay." Sam laughed at her friend as she threw her the towels. "Go wash your hair -- you look wind blown."

"Oh, yeah, well you smell like fish." Countered her friend with a smile.

"Is that a bad thing?" Samantha chuckled as her friend headed toward the bathroom.

"Is my dinner almost done, Sam?" Suz answered, changing the subject with a giggle.

"NO, what do you think I am a magician. I need time to make a masterpiece you know." Sam bounced back at her, "We artists need time to create."

"Well, Samantha, you had better create in a hurry because I'm starving. I'm not used to catching my dinner you know. I usually have it delivered." With that she shut the bathroom door and proceeded to take her friend's advice.

Samantha turned back to the chore at hand and began cutting up veggies for a salad to go with their steamed clams, corn on the cob and boiled potatoes. She had decided they didn't really need the chowder tonight, especially since her friend was so hungry and wanted to eat right now. She always did like one-pot dishes, anyway, you could really use your imagination on them. *Let's see, some Old Bay, a little garlic, a bottle of Corona, lots of water, lime juice and there you have it, instant feast!*

Sam starting thinking about her new living arrangements. It was a little strange getting used to having the beach so close at hand, she had always been comfortable with the lake and the dense forest. But the beach was a welcomed change, perhaps one she could readily become accustomed to. Thinking back on the beautiful sunset they had just watched while in the midst of searching for their dinner, Sam's thoughts strayed back to the lone figure sitting on the beach -- just watching. She wondered if the woman was as lonely as she looked. No one should be that lonely she told herself. *If Laguna is as small a town as Suz says it is, I'm sure to see that woman again and when I do perhaps I'll just say Hi.*

She must have been lost in thought because she didn't even hear the bathroom door open and Suzanne come down the hall.

"Sam -- are you cooking or dreaming?" came a high-pitched voice from the doorway. "Look at that pot, if you don't do something quickly you will have one heck of a mess to clean up. And, I'm not on mess patrol!! What in the world were you thinking about?"

"Oh . . . my mind was just wondering back to the beach . . . It was, uh, such a fun experience." Samantha jumbled.

"And that made you lose all your concentration? Come on, I know you better than that -- what gives?"

"I don't know -- I, well, I . . . "

"You're stammering, Samantha -- What?"

"I was just thinking about that woman you pointed out -- you know -- the one sitting all by herself on the beach. She looked . . . well . . . she looked -- so lonely."

"Oh, for goodness sake Sam -- she was probably just sitting there watching the sunset like dozens of other people do every night. No biggy!! My dinner -- 'bout finished?"

"Yes . . . your dinner's about finished. Let me quickly go jump in the shower. This can all just simmer here until I get back. I've got it low enough that it won't run over again, so no need to worry."

She grinned at her friend as she passed her on the way to the bathroom but her heart skipped a beat as she silently smiled at the stranger in her thoughts. *Yeah, I'll bet I see you again, and I'll just say Hi.*

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Alex stood up and brushed off the sand took one last look at the ocean and inhaled deeply. The warehouse at least was now to the point of being liveable. She had started to purchase some bits and pieces of furniture and was having it delivered as the construction allowed. The equipment she had purchased for the gym and other areas would be the last things to be put into place. As

she walked to the main entrance and unlocked the door she felt a wave of just how small one person really is -- actually what she felt at that moment was another pang of loneliness and she knew she needed to stop thinking about that. She was turning a lovely evening into a melodrama.

She walked over to the freight elevator and stepped in, looking back at the mess the construction people had scattered all over the lower floor. *I will be soooooo happy when all this is cleaned up and I can actually see my vision instead of what still looks like a nightmare. At least my living quarters are beginning to look more comfortable.* One of the first things Alex had put in was a separate lock inside the elevator for the third floor. She didn't want just anyone to be able to get all the way to the penthouse. The electrician arranged it so you could either use a key to continue to the top or use the call box he put in that would release the elevator and allow it to continue up.

As the lift reached the third floor, she heard her phone ringing. She quickened her pace and lifted the receiver, "Hello." Dead silence. "Hello," she tried again. Click. *Okay, so it took me a while to answer but you hadn't hung up before I answered -- so why in the Hell did you hang up when I did?* She hated when people did that. Why didn't they just say they were sorry that they dialed a wrong number?

She got herself out a quick cup-a-noodles and poured hot water from the dispenser on the sink directly into the styrofoam container. *I'm such a cook,* she chided herself. That was one thing Nikki had been good for. *That's really not fair, Alex --* she scolded herself. There were other good things she could remember about the three year . . . no . . . more like a one-year honeymoon, a one-year Really get to know ya and then the year-long break up from Hades. She still didn't understand how she could have been so wrong in choosing Nikki for a life partner. They had seemed so right for each other in the beginning. They both liked the same kinds of things -- they both surfed and both of them were into martial arts. They would both rather be physically doing something than sitting around watching someone else do it. Had she been looking so hard for a soulmate that she took the first person who seemed to blend into her heart. She had her share of dating and had broken some hearts along the way to finding Nikki. Alex was never one to be without companionship, if and when the mood hit her. Thinking back, the mood didn't hit all that often. She was tired of all the one-night stands and the lack of commitment in her life. She guessed that was why Nikki looked so good to her. Before Nikki she could tell within just a few dates that the relationship would be nowhere bound and had the wherewithal to say goodbye before ties were bound too closely. Then there was always the intuitive nature of her parents -- it seemed they almost always knew, even before she did that this one was not good for her or she was not good for the newest addition to her long list of conquests. But she had more or less given up on the idea of ever finding the one person who would complete her. Yeah, she had had enough of the one-night-stands, the adolescent crushes and the women who would always need someone there to pick them up when they fell. She had dreamed of someone she could protect and love surely, but she also wanted someone who would stand up for her if the situation arose. Nikki was there, but as time went on she became more and more jealous of anyone who so much as glanced in Alex's direction. And the temper that seemed to come from nowhere -- she had hidden that all too well during the initial stages of their relationship. As time went on Alex figured perhaps, they were just a little too much alike to ever last a lifetime. Their fights had become downright dangerous. Nothing like taking two volatile tempers combined with two martial arts experts deciding to fight with each other. Nikki could

make her feel like she was a psychopath with lethal combat skills. When Alex finally decided to call the relationship off Nikki had other ideas, she did not want to give Alex up and the final breakup was not a pretty sight to remember.

*That's in the past now, Alex, time to move on. She told herself. The opportunity is looking you right in the face. You've made a commitment to your work and that's just the way it's going to be for a long, long time so get used to it!*

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"Okay, kiddo, I feel like I just lost 10 pounds when I washed away the sand. Are you ready to eat?"

"What do you mean, Am I ready to eat?" Suzanne exclaimed to her squeaky clean friend. "I've been ready to eat since we walked in the door. Are you ready to serve?"

"Pick your poison, TV trays in the living room or here at the table, which will it be?" Sam smiled at her friend.

"Well, since you went through sooooo much trouble as to even go out and catch -- No that would be -- dig up dinner, I think we should sit at a real table to thoroughly enjoy it!" Suzanne answered and Samantha nodded in agreement.

"Great -- I usually plop down in front of the TV or catch up on my e-mail when eating -- this will be a real treat. I actually get to sit at a table and hold a conversation with a real in-my-face person," Sam laughed and started putting the dinner into bowls and plates.

"I don't know how good the conversation is going to be -- I'm famished!!" Suzanne answered her friend.

"Here's the table settings and how 'bout you get the wine, I like the White Zinfandel, do you?" Samantha queried.

"Sure, that sounds like a winner to me," Suzanne answered.

The two friends sat down to the fresh from the sea dinner, corn on the cob, potatoes and a salad. It took less time to consume than it had to acquire and cook but both were quite sated by the time the food was finished. Suzanne's conscience got the best of her and she decided that she should definitely help Sam with the clean up.

"Sam, that dinner was fabulous. You really know how to throw a meal together. How about I help you clean this mess up and then it's my treat to a movie?" The redhead threw out the suggestion to her friend who had already started stacking and moving the dishes from the table to the sink.

"Sounds like a deal to me, Suz. It shouldn't take us anytime at all to clean this up. That's the beauty of a one-pot meal!"

Samantha was right. They were out the door within the hour and off to the theater.

Four hours, one movie and one peppermint green tea from the coffee house later Sam was back in her apartment alone and more than ready to hit the bed. She had had an exhausting yet satisfying day. *I'm so glad I have a friend like Suzanne to kick around with. Unfortunately, I know she'll be keeping herself really busy in a month when Danny comes back from his Westpac. At least until then I have someone to kick around with occasionally and by then I should have made a few new friends. If not, I can really dig my heels in and start giving that book of mine the good old college try.*

She chided herself slightly for not starting on the book sooner, but quickly let the guilt fade as she turned out the lights, went over to the window and looked at the velvet sky. Laguna was beautiful. Because the town was still small and street lights were minimal you could see all the stars in the night sky. Wishing on them was one of her favorite pastimes. *So, Samantha, what will be your wish tonight? Let's see, she pondered, I think I will wish for my pull-apart to stop taking so long in crossing my path,* she mused, remembering one of her favorite stories. She always felt that that story had more roots in truth than in fiction. She especially liked the version of there being three sets of people in the world when the world was still young -- three sexes instead of two. *Let me think, she mused to herself, Everyone had four arms and four legs and two faces. There were the Children of the Sun who were like two men that had been stuck together by their backs . . . There were the Children of the Moon who looked like two girls also glued together . . . and there were the Children of the Earth who were both male and female but nevertheless just one being . . . If it hadn't been for the jealous Gods throwing down lightning bolts, we would still all be attached to our soul mates and would not have to be spending so much time looking for them.*

Samantha liked the idea of the three sexes of people -- that way everyone who loved would be counted and validated and that made her feel good inside. She hated prejudice and bigotry and they were probably the two things in today's society that could really get a rise out of her and make her show her temper. Everything else put aside, thinking of pull-aparts always made her feel as though the day would come when she would meet the person of her dreams. There just had to be someone cut out of the same mold she was, someone who fit her like a glove and vice versa. She knew someday she would find that person, the one who would make her feel the way Danny made Suz feel. She had to believe that she wasn't destined to live her life alone. But she also knew that she was only 26 and she still had time to find that one person in all the world who would complete her and make her totally whole. *Geez, Samantha, there you go off again -- make you whole -- you already are whole. Yeah, she argued with herself, but wouldn't it be great to meet someone who made me smile just by walking into the room, who made my skin tingle by their slightest touch, who made my mouth go dry at the thought of saying their name? Wouldn't it be great if you really do get to feel a sense of totality in the arms of another?*

"Oh, Samantha," she laughed out loud at herself, "You've had one Hell of a busy day girl, get your butt in bed!"

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*Well, Alex smiled to herself, that was a satisfying, energizing and totally empty dinner, but I am full and I will treat myself to dessert before I go to bed.* She decided to take another look at how everything was falling into place before calling it a night and headed toward the elevator. Just as she was about to get in to go down the phone rang again. *I'll be there in a heartbeat this time.* With long quick strides she was at the phone before the third ring and answered, "Hello." Again she heard the deafening silence on the other end of the line. "Come on, it's getting too late to be playing games, who is this?" Now she was beginning to let the anger drift into her voice. "Just tell me what you want. You're making me angry and this is childish. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry." As she punctuated the last word with a quiet lift to her voice, she heard a sigh on the other end and then the phone went dead. *Goddess be Damned!! I hope I don't have to change my number before I even get a chance to memorize it! This is getting ridiculous.* She placed the headset back onto the charger. *I will not let this get the best of my temper. I will not let this spoil my evening.* She chanted these two statements all the way down in the elevator and by the time she reached the first floor she had actually talked herself out of being mad.

She studied the layout of the first floor of her Alternative Paradise, her own brain child, a clinic with a twist that she had never even talked about to any of her clients. She wanted this to be unique and so kept all her ideas secret. Actually keeping a secret was not difficult for Alex it was like second nature to her, a small side that was always hidden from the rest of the world. She liked that part of her, it made her feel secure -- it was where she could hide all her insecurities and no one could harm her there. This clinic would be the fulfillment of her dream. It would be more all-encompassing than any other clinic in the country and she would be the first one to offer such a climate to the waiting public. Hers would be a combination of disciplines all under the same roof. There would be therapy, a spa, a gym, classes and lectures. It would be a life enhancing and life changing encounter. Actually, if she were to really think about it and that seemed to be all she was thinking about lately, this was more a therapist's haven than it was a place for the average public. Her clientele would be as unique as the experience of visiting the clinic -- at least that was all part of the total package.

Therapists could come to learn more, to specialize in other areas of their field and then just relax and use the gym, the climbing wall, the pool, the spa or the beach. They could come and relax while they were learning. All the tools of the trade would be here under her roof. This place would be a smorgasbord for therapists as well as a haven and a working clinic. They could try their hand at all sorts of new equipment before going and purchasing it (from Marge of course) and they could study new techniques and disciplines. People could come here for a class, a lecture or a treatment and end up staying an hour, a day or a week if they chose. It would have all the amenities. The clinic itself faced the ocean, and the entire second floor on the west side had been reconstructed to be solid tempered, tinted glass to take in the breathtaking view at every turn. It had taken painstaking concentration to put out into the universe that she wanted the piece of land the old warehouse had stood on for so many years. She knew if she concentrated hard enough and long enough that the opportunity would arise and she would be there to take advantage of it. Throughout the years she had set up a fund for this project and any extra money - - and there was plenty -- any bonuses were all thrown into the account. She watched it grow as the years went by. Marge had always made sure Alex had more than enough of everything she

needed. Her expense account continued to grow and she never had to pay for travel expense's out-of-pocket. Living basically as a vagabond, she really didn't have any real-life expenses to spend her money on except when she had been with Nikki. Her vehicles were all rented in the company name and the company put her up at only the finest of hotels and residence motels all over the country. To top everything off when she had told Marge and her parents about her dream to build this Alternative Paradise, they all insisted on being silent partners and help with the initial expenses. It just proved to her that she had the confidence of those she felt the closest to and that was always a rewarding feeling.

Alex had been overjoyed when finally, the owners of the warehouse and the land it sat on had decided that they were never going to renovate or use the old property and that it was becoming an eyesore in the otherwise pleasant landscape just south of what the locals called The Village. The land and building were situated in a small cove and the view was breathtaking. Laguna, even though a tourist trap during certain seasons of the year, had remained for all intensive purposes a small, artsy, beach town. The surrounding areas had grown slightly but there was still that laid back and comfortable atmosphere to the entire area. Alex wanted to spend the rest of her life here watching the ocean and being at peace. Her dream was unfolding before her eyes. And she had taken an extended leave of absence from Marge's company to pursue this endeavor.

Today she had just been thinking of how thankful she was that the harder parts of starting the clinic were behind her and the fun of building the clientele and expanding her dream were well on their way to fruition. The workers had promised that the construction would be completed in less than two weeks now. Two weeks, that always reminded her of that old Tom Hanks nightmare of a movie about renovating an old house. All the characters in that movie ever got for an answer when they asked the workers how long something was going to take was, "Two Weeks." As their "Two Weeks" stretched into months not only did the house fall apart but so did the relationship between the two stars. Thank goodness she didn't have a relationship to worry about at this point in time. She was just hoping that her ugly duckling forgotten warehouse would turn out to be as lovely a finished product as the house in "The Money Pit." Actually hope had nothing at all to do with it. It all had to do with funds, perseverance and the dream.

For the past nine years she had been traveling all over the country, depositing bits and pieces of herself in other people's clinics, making other people's dreams come to fruition. It was time for a dream of her own. At one time she thought maybe she would share her dream but that part of the vision had died three years ago when she could no longer tolerate the distrust and jealousy that was abounding in her relationship with Nikki.

Again, her thoughts were turning to Nikki and the heartbreak . . .

*Alex, you're feeling sorry for yourself again and you know that's not a pretty sight. You've had yourself quite a full day and should probably go back upstairs and go to bed. Don't even stop for ice cream at the refrigerator -- just go to bed. Everything will be fine again in the morning and you will be one day closer to the opening.* She thought about the proposed celebration to take place in approximately "two weeks" and laughed at the thought. Then she quickly got back into the elevator for the short trip up to the third floor. *Bed certainly does sound appealing,* she thought . . . In no time flat she was standing in front of the glass in her bedroom. She stood there

in her boxer shorts and tee-shirt and watched as the moon, now high overhead played with the sea, who being fickle had played just so many hours earlier with the sun. The moonlight danced on the beach, making the sand sparkle and giving the illusion of fairies dancing on the water's edge. It was a magical scene and a lovely one to be the last in her thoughts as she laid down on the waterbed and went to sleep.

**End of Chapter One** - Carole Giorgio (e-mail WomynBard@aol.com)

Continued in Part 2.

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**The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive**

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~ Laguna Nights ~  
by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## **Part 2**

### **Chapter 2**

*Change*, she thought as she gazed at her image in the mirror. *Change*, she mulled around in her mind as she stared intently into her own sapphire-colored eyes. *Personal change is what I need, to go with all the other changes I'll be making in the next couple of weeks. Out with the old and in with the new!!* She pondered as she brushed her teeth, washed her face and began combing her



hair. She stroked her long black hair that had been part of her accustomed look in the mirror for as far back as she could remember. She raised one eyebrow slightly as she further examined her image in the looking glass. Yes, she had lucked out in the looks department -- that's what she had been told since she was in grade school. People seemed to envy the combination of steel blue eyes, fair skin and ebony hair. Yet she never could totally get used to the stares she would constantly acquire simply by walking down the street. So, she did her best to build a wall and walk through the world unaware. It was easier that way. If she was oblivious to all the stares by both sexes, she could simply concentrate on what she was doing and ignore what everyone around her was doing.

Thinking back, she remembered consciously deciding to keep her long hair while she was in college. It was kind of her protest of the typical "butch/fem" thing. So when all the other "butches" were donning what was lovingly labeled the Universal Lesbian Cut, she was still sporting her long black tresses. She had refused to be led down that stereotypical aisle and had kept her luxurious dark hair long even to this day.

That decision had caused her to lose more than one date of her choosing as well as her having to stave off the affections of people who were certainly not her type. *Come on, Alex* she chided herself.

*Yeah, I'm constantly getting hit on by women who look like Tom Cruise when I want to date the ones who look more like his wife. I'm really getting sick and tired of being hit on by dykes and tired of the women that interest me not even giving me a second glance. Maybe it is image changing time. I'm settling down in one place, at least that is the entire idea of starting this clinic here in Laguna. I've got myself a penthouse overlooking the Pacific Ocean with all the amenities at my fingertips and to top it all off, I own the whole migilla!! (Well . . . I mostly own it -- along with the Bank, The Parents and Marge) Go with the flow, girl, let's get The Haircut!* As a smirk played upon her lips and her blue eyes sparkled with crisp humor, she decided to go ahead and get the new hairdo to go along with the opening of her new business. She even peppered the decision by telling herself that she would look more "professional" with the shorter cut. She knew this was only an excuse, she had looked "professional" for years and hair was not an obstacle.

She smiled at herself in the mirror and noticed that there were actually still some laugh lines left on the face that had been looking all too solemnly back at her for the past few years. It had seemed that all the fun had gone out of her world and she was simply a puppet whose strings were being pulled with regularity through no actions of her own. This clinic, this dream had actually made her feel human again. And now here she was smiling at the face in the mirror.

*Well, Alex, I guess that's a start anyhow -- if you can't smile at yourself how can you smile at anyone else.* Yes, maybe the haircut would be just the thing to help bring her out of a three-year funk. At least it couldn't hurt anything and if she really didn't like the outcome -- it would grow back in no time. Well, maybe not 'No Time' -- but it Would grow back!

Being kind of on vacation had many pleasures but sleeping in was not one of them. She had been on a schedule of wake up calls, planes and being at meetings on time for far too long to be able

to take advantage of "sleeping in." Then again, not sleeping in had its advantages, especially if you lived three stories up and overlooking the Pacific Ocean in the beginning of the summer. There was so much to look forward to in the next couple of months, including the Laguna Beach Festival of the Arts and the ongoing Sawdust Art Festival that would be starting next weekend. She had always enjoyed going to those events when she was in the area and they were occurring. Of course she knew she would still have her old clients to deal with for at least a little while. They were not being very pleasant about her taking a leave of absence and continued to haunt her e-mail and cell phone. She realized she couldn't very well leave them in the lurch after having spoiled them exceedingly by giving them her undivided attention no matter when they called in need of advice. It would be unfair to simply leave them to their own devices without a period of adjustment.

Strolling into the kitchen she poured a cup of Bengal Spice tea from the automatic coffee maker - *- Nobody said a coffee maker had to make Coffee.* She smiled as she poured the amber liquid into a large cup she had purchased as a souvenir at the last Renaissance Fair. The one held in Northern California had always been a favorite of hers. A little stevia for sweetness, a sip and a smile. *Now, that's the way to begin a morning.*

She sauntered over to the windowed wall and gazed at the Pacific as the sun was just beginning to spread hues of pink across the sand. *Whoever said Heaven was not right here on Earth* she thought as she gazed at this masterpiece of water, sky and earth. Since she really didn't have anything planned for the early morning and since it was too early to make that beauty appointment, she decided that it would be a good time to reacquaint herself with her old friend the Ocean. Donning a new blue Speedo that enhanced the shape of her body and almost perfectly matched the hue of her eyes, she grabbed a beach towel and was off.

*The Goddess was certainly smiling on this piece of land when she decided to put an ocean here,* she mused at herself as she slowly made her way to the water's edge. *Solitude can be such a friend or such an enemy,* she thought as her feet hit the damp sand near the shore line and the coolness sent a tingle up her spine. She let her feet become accustomed to the cool water as she inched her way into it. The small white caps were constantly breaking, sending the water up to her ankles, then to her knees as she walked deeper into the ocean. She quickly got used to the touch of the water on her skin. It reminded her of the touch of an old friend. *No more contemplation, Alex -- just swim!* Off she went with the grace of a dolphin gathering speed as she spied the not too distant waves and headed straight for them. *Damn, it's good to be Home!*

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Samantha never had been a morning person before but being this close to the ocean had started her changing a lot of her old habits. She found she really enjoyed a walk on the beach in the evening and when she could get herself out of bed in time she also enjoyed a morning swim. There was something about walking onto a nearly deserted beach that touched her soul in a way no other place she had ever been did. Today she was lucky enough to have gotten up early and she didn't need to check into work until sometime around ten if she didn't want to. *That's the luxury of this new job,* she thought, *I can get my work basically anytime I want to and all I have to do is get it back to the main office within 24 hours of pickup.* Thinking back to her old job of

going and picking up work and then having to personally take it back seemed so archaic now that her work was made so much more enjoyable by the computer, the phone and the Internet. All she had to do now to get her work was dial, re-record and get to typing. When she was finished with all the work she had recorded for the day, all that was left to do was save the work to a new file and send it via the modem to the main office.

*Thank you for being my friend Suzanne and getting me to move my sorry butt down here away from my family!! I also thank whoever it is who is responsible for looking out for people like me and for letting this job open up just when I needed it the most.*

She again silently thanked her friend from saving her from an existence that was getting more and more difficult to live. Not that she didn't love her family, but they could be so overpowering at times. Mom was of the school that you were an old maid if you weren't married by at least 24. Dad, bless his macho heart, was always trying to fix her up with the sons of his business acquaintances. Thank goodness they had Sally around to cart to all the little parties and the social affairs they were constantly attending. More than once Sally had taken her place at this function or that one and Samantha was always grateful that her sister was such a social butterfly. Samantha hated being put on display and was Really glad to finally be away from all that for a little while at least.

One of the first things she had done after getting all settled in and deciding that she was going to become a semi-beach bum (one that worked and occasionally dressed in other than a bathing suit or cut-offs) was to shear her golden locks. She just couldn't see having all that hair to contend with on a daily or semi-daily basis if she was going to be spending a lot of time in the salt air and salt water. Her hair was so fine it always knotted at the slightest breeze and she didn't want to have to fight with it all the time. Looking in the mirror she was glad she had cut it -- it suited her face and added a hint of maturity that seemed to have been missing a month or so ago. The sea-green eyes looking back at her seemed to have more of a glint in them since she had moved away from home, perhaps it was just more of a satisfaction with life itself. For the first time she really felt like a grown up person and the feeling sat well with her.

She threw on an old swimsuit, grabbed a beach towel and headed for the door. *Maybe I'll just drive down to that little cove we were at last night. I'll bet it's fairly deserted in the morning.* She popped in the kitchen for a bagel-to-go and fixed herself a bottle of water before heading out the door, down the stairs and into her lavender '72 Super Beetle convertible. *No better place for my little car, she admitted to herself. It fits right into the scheme of things here in Southern California. I've gotten more use out of having a convertible in the past month than in the entire year and a half since I purchased it.*

The drive was short (in fact Sam could have ridden her bike, but she didn't feel like spending the extra time this morning) yet the sun was already beginning to warm the breeze, making it just right for this non-native to take a splash in the ocean. The small, winding, private-looking roads didn't even have signs on them and Sam really got the feeling of seclusion. She made sure she parked in a spot where she would have to walk right past the old warehouse again and down the same stairs they had used last night. Of course that wasn't very hard to do because the old warehouse was the only building on this stretch of road and was located next to the only stairs

that lead down to the beach. Sam noticed there were lots of trucks and cars around the building this morning. She figured the construction people got an early start and she was happy they seemed to all be inside. Dealing with construction workers was not usually a pleasant experience. She examined the building as she passed it in the light of day and noticed that a sign had been placed above the door that hadn't been there the last time she had looked -- Welcome to Your Alternative Paradise the sign read. *That's a nice name for a business*, Samantha thought to herself, *I wonder exactly what kind of a business it's going to be? I know there are going to be some kind of therapists doing dictation for us to transcribe because I overheard Jane talking to the receptionist when I was in the office the other day. Alternative Paradise -- what kind of therapists would work for a place called Alternative Paradise.* Well, the owners certainly were doing a good job of making it look like Paradise, maybe that's exactly what it would be when they were finished.

She turned her attention back to getting down to the beach and thought again about the woman she had seen the night before. *Maybe I'll see her again*, she thought to herself. *Right, Samantha, she probably lives in San Diego or Long Beach and was just passing through last night. But then again -- maybe not.* She wondered why these thoughts about this stranger were suddenly filtering through her consciousness. Perhaps it was the landscape and the isolation of the place that brought the picture of the tall dark stranger back into the forefront. She threw off that train of thought and quickly descended the stairs.

The top layer of sand was beginning to be warmed by the sun yet her feet could still feel the coolness left over from the evening as she began walking on the fine grains. It wouldn't be long before bare feet would find it almost impossible to make it from the stairs to the water's edge without getting burnt. As she looked out on the sea-green water she could see two surfers a little off to the right. The beach itself was vacant. There was also a lone figure swimming and diving into the waves. The closer Samantha got to the shoreline the clearer the figure became and she could see it was a woman.

*Look at that grace*, she marveled, *she swims like she has gills and fins.* At one point she thought the woman may have been in trouble because she dove into one of the waves and it seemed like she took forever before coming back up for air. Samantha walked down the strand to the south, not wanting to interfere with anyone else's private time and slowly walked into the water. It felt cool and refreshing and she was glad she had decided to come back to this particular beach. In fact she had decided on the short drive here that this would be her special place. The place she would come when she wanted to communicate with nature and get philosophical and all that stuff that writers do. Yes, this would be her "comfort place."

By the time she was well into the water and swimming she noticed that the other woman was beginning to make her way back to the shore. She glanced over her shoulder and found herself not being as far away from the swimmer as she had tried to be. The current must have pulled her more than she had realized. In doing so it gave her the opportunity to get a closer glimpse of the other woman's face.

*Oh, my*, she marveled to herself, *It is the woman from the other night! Well, I was certainly right about one thing, she must be close to six feet tall and that body . . . she looks like someone out of*

*a sports magazine.* Sam was finding it really difficult not to stare. The woman's features were absolutely beautiful. The lines of her face were angular but not too sharp and she possessed high cheek bones like those of a model.

There was a distinct difference in the woman's body language between today and last night -- and the look on her face seemed to be one of peace and contentment -- not the loneliness Samantha had viewed the night before. *Perhaps she was just having a reflective moment last night. Samantha told herself. Anyhow, who could look melancholy on such a beautiful morning.*

The woman took another dive into the water, came up and threw her head back, casting her hair out of her face and spraying water in all directions. The water spewed hundreds of sun-drenched droplets cascading back into the sea. Then the dark stranger seemed to be taking in all of her surroundings and finally turned her head in Samantha's direction.

Caught off guard and being slightly embarrassed because she had been staring, Samantha gave the woman a full smile and a slight nod which was quickly and slightly aristocratically returned. *What in Tartarus!!* (She constantly thought in mythological terms -- it was the way of the bard after all, and mythology was one of her favorite topics) *Now Samantha Renee why are you blushing and isn't this the most ridiculous thing you've ever experienced? All she did was look at you and smile, Samantha scolded herself, and it wasn't even a big smile. Besides that you smiled first, remember? And, you were the one who nodded. To top it all off -- she's a stranger. What has gotten into you? Go dunk your head and clear your brain!!* With that she dove head first into the next wave, treating it like a cold shower and hoping that when she finally had the nerve to come back up out of the water that the woman would have vanished and her embarrassment would have gone unnoticed.

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Alex had her fill of swimming and looking for dolphins farther out to sea. She knew that the dolphins traveled these waters and on more than one occasion groups of them came fairly close to the shoreline. There were also the sea lions on the rocks just offshore and those that could be visited at the Marine Mammal Center while they were recovering from sicknesses or injuries. Of course there were always the otters fishing for their abalone. This area was a plethora of wild sea life and she was thankful for the activists and their efforts to keep things from getting worse and to better them whenever possible. Alex made sure to give freely to the charities that helped to keep this part of the world safe for those who could not do it for themselves. *You're just an old tree-hugger,* she laughed at herself and then proceeded to pat herself on the back for the very same thought. It made her feel good inside to be able to help such worthy causes. *The animals can't fight back on their own. They need champions to do it for them.* She reminded herself. She was more than happy to give the special people who helped the animals the means to put up a good fight. That way she could stand back and watch the progress without having to be out front and counted. She hated it when people made a big fuss over something good being done without a selfish motive.

By this time she had been bouncing through the waves and swimming until her arms were exhausted. *What an enjoyable workout,* she commented to herself. *Gotta keep in shape you*

*know. You're not getting any younger there, Alex. Yeah, and you should probably start watching your damned diet, too. Cup of noodles, jelly beans and cheesecake are going to start showing on you pretty soon!*

She decided to stop sparing with herself and head back toward the shore. First stop -- make her hair appointment and then supervise some of what was being done to the building today. *I have quite a few letters to send out; perhaps I'll use that new firm I signed on with to do the transcribing. The owner said I could use them for any printed materials I would need. I need to go back and look over the papers she sent -- yeah, I think I will try to get some of that pesky paperwork out of my hair.*

She laughed at her last thought knowing that there wouldn't be much hair left by the end of the day to have anything get caught in. She applauded her own judgement call on getting the hair cut though, especially when thinking of how tedious it would begin to become if she intended on making morning or evening swims a daily practice. As she went under the water for the last time and came back up she surveyed the beach from the south to the north. *Funny, she thought as she turned toward the town, that looks like the woman who was clamming last evening. Well, that certainly is a sight for sore eyes! I wouldn't mind having that scenery around every time I go for a swim -- and I do believe she is smiling at me. Take it easy, Alex, it's just a friendly smile. For all you know she has an old man and a kid at home waiting for her to come fix breakfast.*

Somehow Alex did not really believe that was the case -- but it could have been. She didn't want to seem too intent on making contact with the young woman, so she just gave her one of her crooked half smiles and slightly nodded her head. Her heart was racing as she continued to slowly exit the water and make her way to the place where she had dropped her towel. *By the Goddess, Alex, get a damn grip on yourself. Actually, I think you need to go out to one of the bars this weekend. It's been entirely too long and you need some social recreation . . . need to mingle . . . with real people.*

She picked up her towel and wrapped it around her body then proceeded to walk off the beach and up the stairs to her fortress on the cliff.

She took the stairs two at a time, wondering where she was getting all her energy. She had just spent an hour in the ocean, giving herself quite a workout, and here she was bolting up the steps to her home. By the time she reached the top platform she was completely dry. The sun was shining and the morning was well on its way to being a full-fledged day. She turned one last time to face and search the ocean for a glimpse of the attractive blonde and she was not disappointed. The small woman was getting out of the water and traveling in the direction of Alex.

*Well, I certainly don't need an embarrassing confrontation, Alex began arguing with herself, ah, Hi . . . Hello . . . Do you live around here? . . . My name's Alex, what's yours? No, no, no -- I'm not going through that right now. I have other things on my mind. I've got a business to pull together and I'm not Even going to go there!!*

With that final thought, she spun around and practically ran to the main entrance of the clinic. She opened the door and there was an entire crew of construction people. Everyone turned and

stared as she entered the building and she could feel eyes all over her body. She did her best to give small nods to those she knew and proceeded to go as quickly as possible to the elevator. Once in she let out a deep sigh, used her key and waited as the machine traveled up to the third floor.

*Damn, I hate it when a room full of men just stop and stare. What in the name of Heaven is wrong with them? You'd think they didn't have wives and girlfriends at home the way they gawk!!*

The elevator quickly reached its destination and Alex stepped out into her penthouse. She walked over to the phone and checked for any morning messages. You've got two messages the machine told her. She decided to listen to them both before calling for her appointment and taking a shower.

"Hi, Hon. It's Mom. Just thought I'd ask if you were going to come down this weekend. We haven't seen you in a while and thought maybe we could have a small get together with you and a few friends. I know you've been busy but we do miss seeing that pretty little face of yours. Get back to me as soon as you can, okay. I love you. And, Honey, remember your grandfather's birthday is in a couple of weeks. He's going to be 78 -- it would be nice if you got him a card and got it there on time." Click. *Mom, I'm 30 years old and you Still treat me like I'm 15. Someday, someday you'll realize I'm an adult.* Alex thought again about her last thought and reconsidered, *Then again you probably will Never think of me as an adult.* She shook her head and hit the button for the next message.

The next tone she heard was just one of those tiresome, irritating noise tones you hear when you know someone has listened to the entire 'leave a message' message and then just hung up. *Shit, I don't need this the first thing this morning,* Alex grimaced at the machine.

She erased the recordings. Then she went through her Rolodex for the hairdresser she used whenever she was in town and needed her bangs cut or her dry ends trimmed off. *Well, she will surely be surprised at this call,* Alex grinned into the phone as she began dialing the number.

"Hello, "Clip 'N Tip." Can I help you?" A pleasant voice answered the phone.

"This is Alexis Dorian. I'd like to make an appointment with Sara for sometime this afternoon for a shampoo and cut."

"Sure, Ms. Dorian. Would 4 o'clock be okay with you? Sara's booked until then."

"Yes, four would be just fine. Thanks."

"Okay, Ms. Dorian, we'll see you then, have a nice morning. Bye."

"Bye." *Well, that wasn't too hard now was it? No -- but wait until the cutting starts!!* She smiled and put the phone back on its holder.

Breakfast sounded pretty enticing but she decided on a shower first. *I'll just put some tea in to brew and when I'm finished it will be ready.*

Since she was going to be dealing mostly with the macho element this morning she decided on khaki Dockers and a polo. Shorts always seemed to keep these guys just a little off plumb and she needed them working at the height of their capacity so she could start putting the finishing touches on the inside of the building by the beginning of next week. Things were keeping fairly close to schedule and she didn't want any upsets at this late point. She took one last look in the mirror realizing that this would be the last morning she would be brushing and combing the extensive mane of hair she had observed in the mirror for close to 16 years now. "Change is good", she repeated to herself, "Change is Good!"

Next stop -- the kitchen for tea and a quick bagel as she promised herself a decent lunch before going to the beauty shop. *Okay, Alex. Let's make some notes:*

- 1. Call Mom before the end of the day, or at least by tomorrow.*
- 2. Go check on the construction of the clinic - **NOW***
- 3. Get yourself some real food.*
- 4. Beauty appointment at 4 - **TODAY***
- 5. Call what's her name from the transcription place to get instructions on dictating.*
- 6. Check your e-mail for "gotta have your help" from clients who refuse to believe you get vacations.*

*Well, that's a good start for a Monday morning.*

She tore the note from the pad, folded it into fourths and put it into her pocket. Next she practiced her "Gee, you're doing a swell job" smile and headed for the elevator down to the first floor.

Before the elevator even reached its destination Alex could hear the commotion coming from the floor below. *What in **Hell** is all that about?* The lift came to a stop and she helped the doors slide across anxious to get a better view of the disturbance.

As she came out of the lift she could see that most of the men had been drawn away from whatever it was they were supposed to be doing and were forming a circle near the far end of the gym area. There were shouts and cheers coming from that same vicinity and Alex hastened her step to get into the middle of what was going on.

*I really wish I didn't have to rely on these jerks to get things done around here. Any excuse at all and they are at each other's throats. Why can't they just do their jobs and leave each other alone?*



She reached the area of confusion and had to physically push the spectators out of her way to get into the center of the circle. A few of them pushed back, not wanting to lose their places. They quickly found themselves lying on the floor where the view was nil. As she approached the center of the commotion, she found two of the construction workers rolling around on the floor, hitting and swearing at each other. She couldn't understand a damn thing they were saying but she knew none of the onlookers were in any hurry to stop the fight. She quickly surveyed the situation and stepped in.

Alex placed her hand on the shoulder of the man who seemed to have the advantage at that time and started to pull him off the other guy. Just as she got a good hold of his left shoulder, he swung around and attempted to deck her with his right fist. Alex had just about enough of this nonsense and decided it was not the time to play "good employer." She didn't think trying to talk to these two was going to get anywhere. She caught the large man's fist in her left hand and pushed his arm back into a very unnatural position, causing what she imagined would be a good deal of pain.

"Don't make me have to hurt you," she yelled at the man over the clamor of the crowd. The group was beginning to laugh at the sight of the expression on the man's face.

Angrily the man pulled away from Alex, and got up in her face shouting, "Who the Hell do you think you are, bitch? Why don't you mind your own fucking business?" That was really the wrong thing to say and definitely the wrong person to say it to. He proceeded to come directly at Alex. She quite easily brought her leg up kicking him in the stomach and flinging him back in the direction of his opponent. As he landed back on the floor, a roar rose up from the watchers.

Alex spun around and faced the crowd. She gave them all a look that quickly wiped the smiles off their faces, but no one made a move to go back to work.

The larger man had landed almost on top of the smaller one. He rolled over and got back up much quicker than Alex thought his size and frame would have allowed. "Okay, girly," he growled at her, "You think you're good enough to work with the big boys -- let's see just how tough you really are." His face was now beet red and he reminded Alex of a bull getting ready to charge the matador's cape. With nostrils flaring he started racing toward Alex only to find himself being toppled head over ass and landing back on the ground.

"Ever hear the words 'dumb ox'?" Alex softly said as she flipped him over. "Guess we all know who the trouble maker is now -- don't we?" Alex stated flatly. "I also know that you have no idea whatsoever who I AM, and that's a sorry shame for you!"

"Don't you people have some work to do?" Alex asked the group that was still standing around watching. "Or would you rather be out in the unemployment line with this jerk?"

The crowd quickly started dispersing as the two men on the floor slowly picked themselves up and began straightening their clothes.

"Okay, who wants to tell me exactly what the problem is?" Alex queried with a steel gaze directed squarely on the two culprits. The man directly in front of her had been the one she had just got through roughing up a bit. She would have guessed his age to be in the mid-thirties. He weighed about 210 and stood about 5'9". Alex had to slightly lower her gaze to look directly into his eyes. He was burly and tough looking and didn't make any attempt to answer her question.

She shifted her eyes to the other man who was of a slighter built and looked to be in his late 20's. "Well?" She raised an eyebrow at him. "I do believe I asked what started this mess today, am I going to get an answer or are the two of you going to be pounding cement this afternoon?"

"Who do you think you are to threaten us like that?" The burly one spewed out.

"I am . . . WAS your employer . . . and now I'm nothing to you because -- You're Fired and I'll personally speak to the contractor who hired you to be sure you're not seen in this area again for quite a while."

"You can't fire me, Bitch. I . . ." He started toward Alex with a raised fist.

"I most certainly can and I just did," was the reply he received as well as, "Do you really want to go another round with me? Wasn't falling on your face in front of all your co-workers today enough for you?"

She turned and faced the other man, seemingly ignoring the angry worker in front of her but keeping him in her peripheral vision. "I asked what started all this or would you like to be dismissed, too? Alex asked the man who had yet to look her in the face. "If you don't want to work here anymore, I don't need to know the answer and you can both start walking. So what happened . . . and . . . what are your names?"

"My name's Tim and me and my buddies . . ." the young man began stammering, "we were just kidding around about having to move some of the new equipment in over the carpet this guy had just finished laying." He nodded at the gruff man standing just a short way from him. "He said we couldn't walk on it for at least an hour until the glue he used had cured and that we should be really careful about dragging stuff over it." Tim glanced at the burly man who was still standing there glaring at Alex. "I just made some comment about how we had to be out of here before lunchtime and had no intention of waiting for glue to dry. Well . . . He . . . went ballistic on me and was all over me before I even could tell him I was just joking."

"I won't tolerate fighting on the job, is that understood, Tim?" Alex asked in her quiet yet stern contralto.

"I understand Ms. Dorian. I'm really sorry. You won't have any more problems out of me. I need this job. If it's all right with you . . . can I . . . go back to work now?" The man certainly sounded sorry and Alex was all for giving people a second chance so she dismissed the worker with a simple verbal warning.

"Go ahead back to work, Tim. But believe me I don't want to hear your name mentioned in any complaints from anyone else working here. Is that understood?"

"Understood, Ms. Dorian . . . and . . . thank you." He quickly turned and headed back in the direction of the new Nautilus equipment where another group of men had formed what looked like a chat circle.

*They're worse than a bunch of "old women," she thought to herself. Just look at them standing around gossiping!* She had to laugh when she thought about how macho a front construction workers put on.

Alex turned to face the other worker for what she hoped would be the last time. "You still here? I thought I dismissed you. Get all your stuff and leave the premises. I don't want to see you in my building Ever again." She had already decided that talking to this guy would bring nothing but more trouble. She would get his name from his supervisor and make sure that he got paid for a full week -- not that he deserved it but it seemed fair to Alex.

"You know, you're a real c-u-n...." He started as he passed her shoulders.

*That was Definitely the **wrong** word to start to use with me,* Alex thought as she grabbed hold of him and spun him around to face her. "You know, some idiots like you don't know when to leave well enough alone. You want another go 'round with me Mister?" She asked him with her steel eyes drilling him with holes. *Come on, Asshole, just give me an excuse, any excuse . . .* When he didn't answer immediately, she shoved him out of her face and turned to walk away.

"No, I just want to get my gear and get the hell out of this shit house." He was walking behind her at this point with Alex only a step or two in front. "I didn't know I was working for a damn dyke," the ex-worker mumbled under his breath. Unfortunately for him he did not mumble it quite low enough.

*I don't **Have** to put up with that!* Alex thought and lost what little was left of her temper. She simply stopped walking waited a second until the man was within range and brought her right arm up with her elbow at a 90° angle, hitting him squarely in the face. With a small sneer of satisfaction she heard what she thought might have been his nose breaking. "I'm sorry," she said softly as she turned to face him, "Did I hear you say something to me?"

"God damn it! I think you broke my nose, bitch!" the man screamed as he quickly picked up his pace and headed for the nearest bathroom. "You ain't heard the last from me, guaranteed," he mumbled under his breath as he reached the men's room door.

Alex walked over to the desk where a couple of supervisors were gathered and asked who claimed the trouble maker. "I do," came the response. "My name's Jim Treek and Jake there is my problem. He's had an attitude from day one."

"Well, he won't be having that attitude here any longer," she told Jim, "I just fired him." Alex asked the super to relay the details of what had happened here today to the head contractor and to

have a copy made up for her. "I want him out of here, Jim" she stated but I still want him to get paid for the entire week, you got that?" "Okay, Ms. Dorian -- that's mighty nice of you." Her last remark received a look of admirable surprise from the other supervisors milling around the desk as they all found something to do elsewhere.

"I have some previous appointments to keep," Alex informed the supervisor. "I want him out of here before I return and make sure he doesn't take anything but his own gear. You got that, Jim?"

"Yes, ma'am," was the short reply. "I'll take care of everything. But . . . excuse me . . . Ms. Dorian . . . uh, what about Tim?"

"Don't worry about Tim, if he causes any more trouble -- which I don't think he will -- I'll take care of him then." She looked around and saw that most of the men had decided now was a good time to take a lunch break, but some were still milling around chatting. "Okay, Jim, I'll see you when I get back. Or if I get hung up, just leave the paperwork on the desk here."

"Yes, Ms. Dorian. I'll have everything back to normal by then" he assured her.

As Alex walked toward the front of the building and got near the elevator door, all the workers seemed to be extremely busy with whatever it was they were doing. None were brave enough to venture eye contact. She mentally yelled at herself for not engaging firms who hired women and this just cemented the fact that she needed to do a little more research next time and get crews that were totally or almost all female. She knew women had tempers, too, but they didn't usually go head-to-head during working hours. She didn't want any more of this nonsense before the clinic opened.

Alex reached the elevator, put in her key and hit the button for the third floor. She was going to need to freshen up a little before taking off for lunch and her appointment. *Well, she thought, That was certainly an unusual way to begin the work day.*

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It seemed like Sam had gotten her wish. By the time she came back up out of the water and looked around the tall, dark-haired beauty was no where to be seen. *Just as well for me, I really hate looking like the fool, yet I constantly find myself in just those kinds of situations,* Samantha reprimanded herself. *I don't know what comes over me when that woman is within eyesight. You'd think I'd never seen a beautiful woman before.* She tried to pinpoint just what it was about this woman that so intrigued her but she couldn't, so she decided it was time to go back home and get some work done.

Of course she couldn't go directly home. She was famished. That bagel she had grabbed on the way out of the apartment was long gone. She had to go right past Ruby's on her way home so she figured she'd stop in for a quick breakfast. A veggie omelet, hash browns, a pancake or two and some tea -- yeah, she decided that would fill her empty stomach feeling until she got around to lunch. So Ruby's it was and then home.

She entered the restaurant at a fairly slow time so it didn't take her very long to get her meal, finish eating and get back to the apartment. Arriving home she found three messages waiting for her and decided they could wait until after she had her shower and dressed. She opened the blinds to let in the late morning sun and headed for the shower.

*Well she thought to herself -- I've accomplished absolutely nothing so far today and I feel just great about it. I've had my beach fix, my breakfast and my **eye-candy** . . . Did I really just think that . . . Y-E-S!! And where did that come from Miss Samantha -- she giggled as she undressed and headed toward the bathroom. I don't know why you seem so obsessed with this stranger. Maybe you had just better go introduce yourself the next time you see her and get it the Hell over with!!! NO, came the immediate reply. I can't be doing things like that. What would I say?? Hi, my name's Samantha and I think I have a **crush** on you. Crush, did I just think Crush??? Why would I be having a crush on a woman. I haven't had a crush since I was in high school! As far as Sam was concerned crushes like that were just part of growing up, but here she was 26 years old. You don't have crushes on other women at 26 unless you're a lesbian and Sam didn't **think** she was a lesbian. Maybe that's why none of Daddy's dates ever got past the cheek kissing stage with me. Maybe I am a lesbian. No, I don't think so. I just think I think she's really good looking. There's nothing wrong with thinking that. There are lots of women who look at magazines and say, 'Hey isn't she pretty.' There's nothing unusual with women finding other women attractive. Sure, Samantha, but this one gives you butterflies in your stomach -- There you go again, Girl, such a mind you have this morning!! With that thought she turned on the water and made sure she went Very light on the hot. I'll cool ya down, kiddo.*

She was full, clean, dressed and ready to start some serious work but remembered she had better check the answering machine first.

The first call was from Suzanne. "Hey, Sam. I just got a postcard from Danny and just wanted you to know that he will be getting in a little early. I don't know why but he said they should be in San Diego in a couple of weeks. Just wanted you to know my good news. Talk to you later. Bye."

Samantha decided she really didn't have time to call Suz back right now. She had taken a little longer than she expected at the beach so was going to have to work later tonight if she didn't get started pretty darn soon.

The second call was from her mom. "Hi, Sammie. It's Mom. Daddy and I were talking the other day and he said there was this really big art attraction down where you're living starting in July and running through August. He called it the Pageant of Men or Misterys or -- what was that Don -- oh, silly me -- the Pageant of the Masters. Anyhow, it's supposed to be really nice and we thought maybe we would take a mini-vacation and come down and visit. What -- oh -- Daddy says to get off the phone, I shouldn't talk so long on a machine. Give me a call, Honey. We love you. Bye."

*That's just great. I just get down here and settled in and now I'm going to have to play tourist guide. Samantha really loved her folks but she wanted a little time to get her life situated and organized before she had to explain everything she was doing and why she was better off in*

California as opposed to Washington. She really wasn't looking forward to the reunion being so close at hand.

*Oh, well, I'll just grin and bear it as usual. In the meantime I'd better be getting this apartment into shape, Dad will be scrutinizing it with those eagle eyes of his and Mom will be wanting to go shopping to accessorize everything I own.* She sighed and hoped they would bring Sally along with them, at least that way she would have a comrade for the visit. Getting out a sticky note she jotted down - "Call Mom" and stuck it up on the refrigerator where she knew it wouldn't be missed.

*Okay, one to go. Can only be work. I'm out of people.* And work it was, telling her that things were a little slow today and that they had faxed her only one provider-- a fairly easy one who had about 15 reports on the machine. She reset the answering machine and headed for the office area she had fixed up in the corner of the living room. The computer was in front of a window which had a very small view of the ocean. There were a couple of faxed pages on the desk and as she looked them over she figured it would only take a couple hours to knock it all out. She was glad she had taken the time this morning to go to the beach. With the work this slow she could spend some time unpacking the boxes she still had sitting around the apartment, especially now that she knew her folks were coming down in a month or so. She had a big incentive to get everything in a place. But work came first so she picked up the faxes and set up the re-recording machine.

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Once upstairs it didn't take long to re-shower and put on some clean clothes. No need for Dockers this time she told herself. She knew half the crew would probably be long gone before she got back to the building so she didn't need to look like a boss. She picked out a pair of turquoise running shorts, with a t-top to match and her Reeboks . All that was left on her agenda for the afternoon was to have lunch, call Jane Attenberg at Flying Fingers and go get her hair cut.

Alex left the building and walked around to her three-car garage. She didn't like the idea of leaving her Boxster out in the sea weather so a garage had been a must. After all since it was the first car she had actually purchased in almost 10 years she wanted to make sure it was out of harm's way, especially with the way the tourists tended to park during the summer months. Alex had taken almost a month to decide on exactly the kind of car she wanted to own. But the final decision was easy once she saw the car of her dreams.

The Porsche Boxster 2-door convertible seemed to be waiting there in the show room just for her to slip into the driver's seat. Even the color was perfect, a deep metallic midnight blue that glimmered when either the sunlight shone or the moonlight beamed down upon it. She decided on the convertible because California weather was perfect for having the top down. This one had been already loaded with amenities and the Sport Touring Package even included an on-board computer. She opened the garage, got into the car and made her way downtown toward the Village. The word pizza was swimming around in her head and her stomach was telling her very loudly that she was famished. No problem -- they had a Chicago-style pizza place right on Coast Highway less than five minutes away. With her destination in mind she was off and running. She

now had about two hours to kill before her hair appointment and lunch seemed like an excellent idea.

Since the regular lunch hour had been over for a while there was no waiting for a table. Alex sat down and ordered a small vegetarian Chicago-style pizza and a draft Dos Equis. While she was waiting for her food to arrive she decided to give Jane Attenberg a call and see if she could have someone deliver one of the dictating machines to the house tonight.

Alex dialed the number and waited.

"Hello, Flying Fingers. Julie speaking, can I help you?"

"Hello, Julie. May I please speak to Jane Attenberg? This is Alexis Dorian."

"Just a minute, Ms. Dorian. I'll see if she's available." The receptionist replied.

Just a few seconds later Alex heard the small voice of Ms. Attenberg come on the line. "Hello, Ms. Dorian. So good to hear from you again. What can I do for you?" There was a small amount of nervous shaking in her tone. "I didn't expect to hear from you for at least another week. Is everything going according to your plans?"

"Everything is just fine, Ms. Attenberg . . ." Alex began

"Jane, you can just call me Jane." The woman on the other end chimed in.

"Well, in that case why don't you call me Alex and we'll be on equal footing." Alex tried to put the woman at ease. "I was wondering if I might have one of those dictating machines a little early. I might want to dictate a few letters that I need to get out before the clinic opens." Alex explained into the phone line. "Do you think it would be possible for someone to drop it off at my home this evening?"

"I don't think it would be any problem at all, Alex. One of my girls lives not too far from you and I'll just give her a call and see. I'm sure she'll be glad to bring it to you and even show you how to get started dictating if you'd like." The woman seemed more than happy to be of service now that she wasn't afraid that Alex was calling to cancel their deal. Jane would probably have bent over backwards for her in anticipation of the amount of business a place like Alex's could eventually send in her direction. *Just being a good business woman*, Alex noted, *I certainly can admire that.*

"That would be just fine. I'll be home all evening after about 5:30 if that wouldn't be too late." Alex countered.

"No, I think that would be just fine. Do you want me to have her call before she comes over?"

"No." Alex said, "I'll be home the entire evening, anytime after 5:30 will do. Thank you, Jane. I'll be talking to you later." Alex waited for the other woman to say good-bye and then hung up just as her pizza was arriving at the table.

"Looks great!" She told the waitress, "I'm famished."

From where she was sitting in front of a west view window Alex could see one of the 3 volleyball courts on the beach. There was a woman's game in progress so she had plenty of eye-candy to keep her busy while eating her lunch.

*Now this is the way to have a business lunch*, she laughed as she finished off her beer and called for the check. It was just about time to get over to the beauty salon and she didn't want to be late for fear she just might chicken out.

She decided to go ahead and walk over to the Clip 'N Tip and did a little window shopping along the way. Laguna windows were always a pleasure to stroll by. There was such a diversity of goods being sold by all the local and the not-so-local artisans. An entire week could be spent looking in all the shops and by the time one finished, most of the goods would have been replaced by new items so you could start all over again.

Before she realized it she was in front of the salon and a small, pink haired beautician was smiling broadly at her. "Well if you aren't a welcomed sight," Sara smiled at Alex and then began spewing out her hairdresser questions -- "I hear you called for an appointment? You're my 4 o'clock, right? Are your bangs too long? Are your ends split? The gal said you wanted a shampoo and cut?"

"Yes, yes, no, no, yes - both done . . ." Alex tried to keep up with the questions. Then she looked at Sara and stated in the most solemn voice she could muster, "I want it all cut off."

"You've got to be kidding me, right?" Sara squealed in amazement.

"No. Not kidding. I want a "summer cut." There she had said it -- whew -- that wasn't so hard now, was it?!"

"Are you sure, Alex? You're hair is so beautiful. But I'll bet it can really get to be a pain in the butt in the summer, especially if you like swimming, huh?" Sara just wanted to make sure that Alex was still going to be a happy camper when she left the salon -- she hated it when customers asked for hairstyles they ended up hating.

"I'm absolutely positive, Sara," Alex assured the young stylist. "I've given it a lot of thought and it's time for some radical changes in my life, this is one of them." She smiled to put the girl at ease and then added, "I'll let you decide on the style -- just make it short and in vogue, okay?"

"You got it -- are you ready to rock and roll?" Sara held out her arm in a "let's go into the salon" movement and the two of them walked into the shop.



When Alex got up from the chair, a half-hour later she looked totally different. She had studied the new look side to side and front to back and was entirely pleased with the final result. Sara had left her bangs so they could be worn either up or down but the rest of her hair was now styled fairly close to her head. The front seemed to fall into all the right places and the tapered back was indeed the latest style. She couldn't believe how much lighter her head felt and it was an unusually good feeling. Luckily for Alex she had a lot of natural body to her hair so there was a fullness to the cut even with the lack of length. *Okay, she mused at herself, You've really done it now. Wait until the folks see this, they won't believe it until they actually see it -- I just know that. Yes, I have joined the ranks -- I now look more like who I am -- So Alex, welcome to the club.* She paid the cashier and gave Sara a large tip and a genuine thank you. As she was walking out the door Sara ran up to her with a small baggie in her hand. "I thought you might like some of this for a souvenir," she giggled as she put the bag into Alex's hand. "It will be quite a while before you see it that length again. See you later, Alex."

"See ya, Sara. Thanks -- I appreciate this." And she held the bag up eye level looking at what was left of her long dark tresses. With a smile and a wave she was off to her car and back to the house.

It was almost 5 o'clock and she had told Jane she'd be home after 5:30 so she'd best be getting there.

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Samantha was right, it only took a little over two hours and she was done for the day. It was a little past 4 o'clock and she was in the middle of unpacking when the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Hi, Samantha. This is Jane Attenberg."

"Oh, Hi. Did something rush come in?" Samantha asked.

"Sort of Samantha. It's not transcribing but I will pay you for your time. I have a favor to ask of you if you are not too busy this evening," her boss began.

"What kind of favor?"

"Well, one of our new clients has decided that she would like to have one of the Dictaphone machines personally delivered to her tonight."

"Uh, huh?" Sam queried.

"I was just wondering, since you don't live far from this client and since you really didn't have a lot of work today and might need the extra money . . . Well, I was just wondering if you would like to deliver the machine and perhaps help her to set it up and show her how to get started?" Jane let the ball drop into Samantha's court for the answer.

"Well, Jane. I really didn't have anything planned for this evening except for doing some unpacking which I hate to do anyway. So . . . Yeah. Sure. I'd be happy to take one of the machines over to the client. Who is she?"

"Her name is Alexis Dorian. She's refurbishing that old warehouse south of town off South Coast Hwy. It's only about 2 miles from the Red Lobster and if you go as far as The Laguna Reef Inn you've gone too far. The directions may sound a little complicated, but it's really easy to get to and impossible not to spot if you are in the right vicinity. You know where Ruby's is don't you, Samantha."

"Actually, Jane, I think I know exactly where the building is. Is it the right hand turn off Coast Hwy after Horizon View Drive?"

"Yes, Samantha, that's the road. It's still unnamed but I think she's in the process of having the street named after her new business."

"If the business is called Alternative Paradise, Jane, I know exactly where it is. I was just swimming on that beach this morning." Samantha smiled into the phone at the thought of her destination. *Now I'll actually get to see the inside of the "castle" as well as the outside.* She thought to herself.

"Yes, that's the place," Jane confirmed. She said she would be home anytime after 5:30 and you needn't call ahead. I don't even think she has an address yet but she lives in the building so you should have no trouble finding it. No need to dress for business, just casual will be fine. I really appreciate this Samantha and as I said earlier, I will reimburse you for your time."

"Okay, Jane, that's cool." Sam replied. "Gosh it's almost 4:30 now. Let me change at least into something I haven't been cleaning in for hours and get over to the office to pick up the machine. I should be there in about 30 minutes -- that will give me plenty of time to get there, it only takes about 10 minutes from your place. Does that sound all right with you."

"It sounds great, Samantha. Again, I really appreciate you doing this on such short notice. I think we may be a little slow the next week or so but when this clinic opens up, we should have more than enough work to keep you busy. See you in a bit." With that she hung up and Samantha went to take another quick shower and change into a decent pair of jeans and a blouse.

Carefully going through the clothes in her closet she decided on a pair of stone washed jeans, a blouse with small daisies dancing around the collar and a pair of white sandals. She considered this to be a casual summer outfit but not so casual that it couldn't pass for being business casual. Anyhow, Jane had said she didn't have to dress up and it was after hours. She'd be at Jane's in just a few minutes and then on to see the inside of the warehouse.

Jane had the machine set out and ready to be picked up when Samantha arrived at the office and she had left the door unlocked.

"Hello, Jane. It's Samantha, I'm here to pick up the machine." Samantha called slightly above her normal level.

"I'm back here, Samantha. Come on in." Her boss answered. "Now, you won't have any trouble instructing her how to use this, will you Samantha?"

"No problem at all -- piece of cake. Of course it also depends on how savvy she is about doing something like this. If she's a real novice I may be there a while but if she has the brains to put together a place like the one she has, I'm sure there will be No Problem." Samantha answered with near certainty.

"Well, I had best get started -- don't want to keep the lady waiting." Sam smiled at her boss, picked up the machine and started for the door.

"Here, let me get the door for you. Thanks again, Samantha and have a nice evening. Ms. Dorian seems like a nice enough person, a little on the stringent side, very business like, but she seems nice. I'm sure you'll have no problems." Jane opened the door for Samantha to pass. "I'll talk to you in the morning to see how everything went." She closed the door and Samantha could hear the lock click behind her as she made her way to the VW.

*Thank goodness I have the top down tonight, I don't think I could have opened the door with this machine in my hands.* She placed the machine on the seat and went around to the driver's side. Sam really felt excited about getting to see the inside of the warehouse. She hoped it would not disappoint her - it looked so enticing with all the changes she had seen it go through.

The late afternoon temperature was a comfortable 72° and the wind felt good blowing through her hair on the short trip to the Cove area. She was there in less than 10 minutes and was even a little early. Sam got out of the car and went around to get the Dictaphone and then walked up to the double doors of the warehouse. Something new had been added since this morning -- actually it was the double doors. *Wow, she thought, I've never seen doors like this before.* As she stood there holding the machine she studied the unusual portal before her. On each of the doors was an identical stained glass panel. In the center of each was a large emblem of a lavender and white yin-yang. Surrounding the symbol and in varying colors were other symbols, some which Samantha knew like the Pentacle, the cross and the Magen David. Others she had seen but didn't know the names of. One of the figures even looked like a female Buddha. *What a wonderful design for the entrance to a place called Alternative Paradise,* she thought to herself as she stood there just holding the machine and staring. She made a mental note to come back again to examine the doors more closely and to write down everything on them so she could go home and look it all up. This place was definitely beginning to live up to her imagination of what it should be.

A little to the right of the doors was a call box and Samantha leaned up against the building with the machine being balanced between the building and her body and pushed the button. A couple seconds later a rich contralto voice answer with a singular, "Yes?"

"Ms. Dorian? This is Samantha Riley. I'm an employee of Jane Attenberg's. She asked me to drop this Dictaphone machine by and perhaps show you how to use it."

"I'll be right down, Ms. Riley. Give me a minute." The unembodied voice answered. *What a Voice!* Samantha thought to herself. *I hope I get to do whatever it is she dictates. I could listen to a voice like that forever.* She heard so many unappealing voices in her work that this voice literally sent chills down her spine. *If only all voices had that tone and quality. My job would be a cinch. On second thought I might spend more time trying to imagine the body beyond the voice and get absolutely Nothing done. Well, at least I won't have to wait to match this voice and body together!*

Sam saw the light switch on in the hallway, illuminating even more the stained glass designs on the doors in front of her. She was so mesmerized with the beauty of the glass that she missed seeing the figure arrive at the doors until they were opened and the woman was standing before her.

*It's Her,* Samantha shouted in her mind. *It's the woman on the beach. It's the woman in the water. By the Gods this must be fate. I actually get to meet this stranger face-to-face and she has a voice to match the body and eyes I could get lost in. Her hair, though --- what did she do to her hair --- I distinctly remember it being really LONG. Who cares, silly, whatever she did she's still the most attractive woman you've ever laid eyes on.* She was staring again and her mouth must have been hanging wide open.

The woman had opened the doors and was just standing there, towering over Samantha, with a slightly crooked smile on her face. She lifted her left eyebrow slightly and addressed Sam with "Would you like to come in and show me how to set the machine up? Or would you rather just like to stand there a little longer?" She smiled a little broader and continued, "Only kidding, but you do look like you've just seen a ghost."

Actually, Alex was as dumbfounded as Samantha but refused to let the emotion show on her face or in her demeanor. In fact she wasn't exactly sure how she was going to handle this. Should she let the small woman know that she had seen her on those two occasions or should she just let it go? Obviously, the petite woman standing in front of her realized that Alex was the person she had seen on the beach last night and again this morning in the water. That was the most obvious reasoning to atone for the look of astonishment on the young woman's face.

Samantha shook her head slightly and gave the taller woman a shy upward glance without really lifting her head to face her. *Well, you had hoped you would get the opportunity to meet her. Be careful what you wish for Samantha . . .* She cleared her throat and in a very dry voice said, "Uh, huh. I would be glad to set up the machine . . . lead the way."

"Why don't you let me carry that machine," Alex said as she began to take the piece of equipment out of the smaller woman's hands, "it looks rather heavy and you've been standing there with it for some time now."

"Well, thank you Ms. Dorian . . . but . . ."

"No buts, let me have it -- and it's Alex -- just call me Alex, my Mom's Ms. Dorian."

"Okay, Alex but only if you'll call me Samantha." Sam looked up into those deep blue eyes and felt like melting.

At the exact same moment Alex looked down at Samantha and saw two emerald discs looking back at her. *Samantha* -- Alex rolled the name over in her mind -- *That is certainly a beautiful name and it seems to fit her. I didn't think I'd get the chance to meet her in person this soon. I know Laguna's small but this is marvelous. ----- Watch your step Alex, don't get foolish.*

"All right, Samantha, why don't you just follow me and we'll get this little beauty connected."

Alex turned and walked back down the hallway with Samantha close behind. The taller woman hadn't realized that it took two of the other woman's steps to match every one of hers. Eventually Samantha was almost running just to stay even with Alex and she wasn't doing a very good job at that. They reached the elevator with Sam a good three or four steps behind even with trying to keep up.

"I'm sorry," Alex apologized, as she turned around and could see that she had left Samantha in her shadow. "I tend to forget that everyone doesn't walk as fast as I do and that's just plain rude."

"No, no problem," Samantha puffed slightly out of breath but more from anxiousness than exertion. At least she had an excuse to be breathing so deeply. "Actually, I don't think it's your speed, I think it's your stride. You have a few inches on me," Samantha said with a slight smile up to Alex.

"Yes, I guess I do at that now don't I?" Alex smiled back.

Alex pushed the button and the door immediately opened, she stepped inside, placed the machine on the floor and waited for Samantha to enter. Since Sam was the last one in, she was standing closest to the panel where the key had to be placed to allow them access to the third floor. Alex stepped directly behind Samantha and reached over her shoulder to put the key in. Samantha, suddenly realized she was standing in the way and awkwardly tried to move . . .

"No, no. Stay where you are. Your okay," Alex told her. "I just need to reach over and put this key in so we can get all the way up to the third floor. The other side of the panel will only allow us to get to the second floor." She gave Samantha a quick smile.

*Damn, Samantha thought to herself as her heart started pounding, I don't believe the feelings I'm having. She's barely touching my back and I feel like it's on fire. I've **Never** had this kind of reaction to **Anyone** before - especially to a woman!* Samantha could feel the blood rising from her neck to her face and kept herself face forward for fear of Alex seeing her blush.

Alex was having a similar reaction to reaching over the smaller woman's shoulder. Her breasts gently brushed Samantha's back and she could feel the nipples underneath the tank top immediately begin to harden. *Oh, **Shit**, this is Just what I need. 'Pervert makes pass at young*

*professional woman in private elevator in Laguna.' She could see the headlines. Make it quick, Alex, before she thinks you are making a pass at her. What a lovely way to start a business relationship. You should have let her move -- **FOOL.***

The lift finished its short trip to final destination. "Okay, here we are," Alex picked up the machine and stepped out of the elevator. "Follow me," Alex instructed as they entered the penthouse level of the warehouse. She proceeded to open a door that was slightly on an angle and to the left of the elevator doors. The first thing Samantha noticed was the expanse of light in the large room. To the right as they walked in was a kitchen done all in what looked to be a white mahogany with the cabinets on the north wall, an island in the middle for food preparation and a breakfast bar separating the kitchen from the living area. To the west of the kitchen was a glass topped dining table with a breathtaking view of the Pacific. The floor plan was almost totally open with only the bar separating the kitchen and living room. The living room was sparsely furnished but did have a stone fireplace on the east wall. Samantha could see into the next area, also because all that was separating it from the living room was what looked to be a full size bar.

"I don't have all my furniture yet," Alex apologized, "So the place looks a little empty. I haven't really finished planning out exactly the look I want to end up with."

"I think what you have so far is just marvelous," Samantha commented. "There's so much open space and so much light. It's absolutely the most beautiful view I've ever seen from someone's living room."

Samantha walked closer to the floor-to-ceiling windows and looked out to the ocean as the sun was about an hour or so away from the evening descent. "Breath taking, I think I would definitely call this breath taking."

"Well, I'm glad there is someone else who gets the same feelings I do when I look out over this view. Actually, you're the first person I've had up here besides construction workers, installation and delivery people." She motioned to Sam toward the open door to the south of the living area. "I've kind of set up a temporary office in the bedroom. I have my computer, fax and a couple phone lines in there. It probably won't stay there but it will do for now." Alex led the way into the large master suite and Samantha followed.

"Please excuse the mess in here, I have lots of things to unpack." Alex apologized again, pulling clothes off the king size waterbed and tossing them into the laundry shoot on the other side of the room. She pointed in the direction of the wrap around desk which held a computer, a fax, a phone and a printer.

"Okay." Said Samantha -- "Let's get you hooked up and then I'll give you a quick lesson on how to operate this little beauty." She smiled in Alex's direction. The set up was a snap and they had everything connected in a matter of 10 or 15 minutes.

"Now, comes the fun part, Dictaphone 101. Are you ready?" Samantha asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," was her reply.

"Well, why don't you sit down here like you're going to dictate and I'll go over the procedure with you. If you run into any problems everything is spelled out fairly clearly here in the manual." Samantha waited for Alex to come and sit down at the desk and then she handed her the microphone. "Now you can use this, the telephone receiver or you can use the automatic mic that's attached to the machine. Probably the easiest to use would be the automatic mic. Any of them will work but remember when the machine is on all the background noise will also get recorded, so the room needs to be fairly quiet -- for the sake of the transcriptionist," she added with a large grin. "The power switch is here . . ." As Samantha proceeded to push the switch into the "on" position, Alex's hand reached over covering the smaller hand just as it made contact with the machine. Alex had thought that Samantha wanted her to turn the machine on and her movement was almost synchronized with Samantha's -- obviously it was a wrong decision. The touch was quick and just as quickly removed, but there was an intensity in the moment that made the touch feel more like a caress.

Alex swallowed harder than she had anticipated and could have sworn that Samantha must have heard her, "Gosh, I'm sorry, I thought you wanted me to turn it on."

"That's . . . okay," Samantha said knowing that the gentle touch had just sent a tingling sensation up her entire arm and now she was feeling tongue-tied. "Let me just . . . quickly go over . . . all the buttons and knobs and explain everything I think you might need to know." When she was finished with everything she could possibly think of, she let out a slight sigh.

"That about does it. Do you have any other questions?"

"No, I don't think I'll have any trouble at all." Alex answered, "But, if I do, I'll just ask Jane to have you come back over and re-instruct me, how does that sound? *What a stupid thing to say* she reprimanded herself and quickly added, "I'm just kidding, Samantha, I think I will be just fine."

She got up from the desk and stood in front of the smaller woman. They had taken quite a bit of time going over all the nuances of the machine and how to dictate. As she looked out at the ocean she could see that the sunset was almost in progress.

They walked back into the living room and Alex decided to be bold and make a suggestion. "Could I offer you a glass of wine or water or something? Would you like to watch the sunset? It really is beautiful from here." Alex said hoping that Samantha would say yes to both questions. She didn't want this person standing in her bedroom to remain a stranger and felt that in just the short amount of time they had already spent together that that expectation was not too far fetched.

"A glass of wine would be really nice and I would love to watch the sunset from here! I do believe this is the best seat on the beach." Samantha smiled at Alex.

"Red or White?"

"Huh?"

"Wine." Alex grinned. "Red or white wine?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Whichever, ah, what do you suggest?"

"Well," Alex pondered for effect, "I think White Zinfandel is definitely a good choice to go with sunsets."

"Sounds like a winner to me," Samantha agreed.

"So, pull up a couple pillows and grab a piece of the floor -- I haven't picked out a couch yet." Alex said as she walked over to the bar.

Samantha took two of the large pillows from beside the fireplace and placed them closer to the window facing out towards the ocean. She took one for herself and propped it under her chest as she relaxed on the floor and took in the awesome view. "This really is Paradise, isn't it?" She said more to herself. She was looking outward and didn't notice the affectionate smile Alex gave as a response.

"Well, here's to the beginning of a long working friendship - if I'm not being too presumptuous." Alex said as she walked over to Samantha and handed her a glass.

"To friendship -- that's a perfect toast," added Samantha.

The two toasted each other shyly looking into each other's face and trying desperately not to show what was actually going on in their minds. Alex broke the silence after the toast with a confession.

"You know, Samantha, I'm pretty sure I've seen you twice in the last two days, down here on the beach. Am I mistaken or was it you?"

"Yeah, it was me. The first night I was with my friend Suzanne and we were digging clams. I haven't lived here very long and kind of decided that this was going to be my comfort place, this beach of yours. So, you'll probably be seeing a lot of me. I was here this morning, too. And I have a confession -- I saw you both times I was here but was afraid to say hi. You never can tell about people these days, even saying "hi" can get all kinds of unusual responses. I was really surprised, though, when you opened the door tonight and your hair was short. It looks good on you. I think I like it better the way you have it now and I'm sure it's easier to take care of. I know I prefer mine short especially if I'm going to be doing a lot of swimming." She glanced over at Alex who was just sitting on the floor watching the sunset and listening to her talk.

"You know Samantha, it feels really nice having someone here to share the sunset with. I think they should be shared, don't you." She turned and looked at the green-eyed cutie who was now sitting cross-legged on her living room floor.

"Yes, I think the Gods . . . I bet I sound crazy, don't I? But you see -- I really like mythology and sometimes get carried away with. . ."



"No, no -- go on," Alex encouraged her.

"Well, I think the Gods had a little soft place in their hearts for us at one time. After watching us run around all day long, working so hard from the time we got up until the time we went to bed, I think they felt a little sorry for us. So, they decided to give us a reward at the end of each day. Something that would make us slow down for a little while, sit still and just be quiet and watch. They made it sooooo beautiful that we decided it needed to be shared and romanticized it. That's why we all get this really warm, fuzzy feeling deep inside every time we see a beautiful sunset reflecting all the colors of passion from the cool subtle blues and lavenders to the hot oranges and pinks. It stirs something deep within us from the depths of time and brings a fitting end to the day."

She looked over at Alex and thought she saw a tear beginning to trickle down the dark haired woman's face. Samantha didn't know why but she had the strongest desire to lean over and brush the tear away. Before she could think about it, she was actually doing it. Alex gently took her hand as the tear was wiped and simply smiled -- into the face of an angel.

"Thank you, Samantha, that was a beautiful thought. I don't think I've ever heard anyone describe the origin of a sunset any better." She smiled again and then realized that she was still holding onto the other woman's hand -- she let go -- slightly embarrassed.

"You're welcome, Alex. It's just that I have this vivid imagination and . . . well . . . thank you," She said slightly embarrassed as well. "I think maybe I'd better get going, I don't want to overstay my welcome the very first time I'm here." She smiled again and rose to leave.

"Okay, leave if you must, but there's no way you can overstay your welcome here, my friend. You are very welcomed to come back anytime, in fact why don't I give you a call tomorrow? Since you've only been in Laguna for a short period of time and I have been around forever, there are a lot of things I could show you if you'd like."

"That would be great," Samantha beamed back at her.

"It's a deal then. Come on let me take you down to your car."

The two newly acquainted friends slowly walked to the elevator and rode the short distance down to the first floor in silence each lost in her own private thoughts.

"So, Alex, it was really good to meet you and I will be looking forward to hearing from you tomorrow. I know you won't have any trouble with the Dictaphone and I'm really glad Jane asked me to bring it over. Thanks again for the wine and the sunset." She looked up into the taller woman's face and didn't know whether to offer her hand. She decided against it and simply said, "Good night, Alex." With that Samantha walked over to her car, got in and started it up. She waved at Alex as she started off down the street.

Alex said Good night and watched as Samantha crossed the street and got into her car. She made sure the car started and then waved back as Samantha pulled away. "Okay, Samantha -- til

tomorrow," Alex said to the wind as she walked back inside, closed the stained glass doors and walked back into the all too quiet warehouse.

## End of Chapter 2

Continued in Part 3.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

WomynBard@aol.com

## Part 3

### Chapter 3

Alex listened to the sound of silence as she retraced the steps she and Samantha had just taken down the hall to the elevator.

*Funny how comfortable it was to have her here with me.* She thought to herself. Of course she knew that Samantha had no idea of her lifestyle and that she would probably have nothing to do with her if she did. So, she began thinking of ways to keep her new found friend in arms' reach without getting romantically involved with her. Not getting amorous about Samantha was really

going to be hard because she already found herself feeling extremely attached to the young woman.

*Well, just take it one step at a time, Alex, and see where it leads. You may end up with just a really good friend and you've needed a good friend for a long time now.*

Her immediate agenda was to plan something special for their next encounter and she only had one night to come up with an enticing suggestion.

Alex decided to take a slow look around the lower level of the clinic. Things were beginning to fall nicely into place. The gym area was totally completed as well as the locker room and shower areas. The workers had just finished constructing the climbing wall a few days ago and today the finishing touches had been put on. She was pleased with the aesthetic look of what she thought might have turned out to be a monstrosity. She had gotten the idea to add this to the establishment when she was in the Cave Wall down in Old Town in San Diego. There would be a lot of uses for equipment such as this: dexterity, peace of mind, body building and just plain fun. She had a good time picking out the colors and shapes of the climbing holds. As she looked up at the wall with the overhead lights illuminating it, the colors were very spectacular.

She had decided to mix and match when it came to the holds. If she remembered correctly, she had chosen from four different shapes and colors: The *drips* were an aqua blue and reminded her of water droplets; the *mushrooms* looked like natural fungus hanging on the wall and were various browns and tans; the *desert* holds were an assortment of lizards, snakes, pottery, and cattle skulls and these were a beautiful coral color; lastly there were the *pebble* holds that encompassed every color under the rainbow and ranged in sizes from a silver dollar to that of a fist. The arrangement of the holds could be changed on a bimonthly basis that way the regulars would not get bored with climbing the same wall week after week.

Alex was glad she had decided to put some angles in the wall to make the climbing a little more of a challenge and actually to make it a little safer for beginners. She had the construction people open the warehouse up, all the way to the top for this project, making it the full three stories high with a glass ceiling. Looking up at the ceiling at night was beautiful. There was still a touch of light in the sky tonight, but on a dark night the stars would all be visible and the moon would shine down and illuminate the wall with silver light. Alex half decided to climb the wall tonight but thought better of it and walked back to the elevator.

She got into the elevator, put her key in and went up to her living quarters. On the way up she realized that she was a little hungry. *Funny, I hadn't even thought of food while Samantha was here and now it's almost 9:00 and I haven't eaten dinner.* Lucky for her she ate that pizza at lunch. At least now she wasn't starving. Besides that she did have the left over pieces -- she could eat them now instead of saving them for breakfast. If she had been smart, she would have invited Samantha to go out for something to eat after the sun had set -- *Stupid. You always think of things after it's too late. Oh, well there'll be other times. I need to remember to take it slow so I don't scare her away.*

The elevator came to a halt with an easy jerk. She got out and went back into her apartment. *I guess I could give Mom a call. Actually, I do need to tell her that I won't be down this weekend.* Dreading the reaction her mother would have to her not coming, she walked over, picked up the receiver and dialed the familiar number.

The phone only rang twice before Aurora's voice came through with her typical, "La Jolla Paradise."

"Hi, Mom. I didn't get a chance to call yesterday so I thought I'd give you a buzz and let you know that this weekend is not good for me to come down." Alex started the conversation.

"Oh, Honey. We were so looking forward to seeing you. Exactly when do you think you'll be coming down and why can't you make it this weekend?" Her mother whined at her through the telephone line.

Alex hated having to tell her mom no, she always felt like such a bad daughter when she did.

"Listen. Something just came up. Well . . . that's not exactly true . . . Some--one just came up." Alex confessed, deciding she wanted to talk to her mom about Samantha. After all her mom was just about the closest friend she had right now and she was usually pretty easy to talk to.

"Oh, really. And is this Some--one any--one we know, Alex?" Her mother inquired.

"No. In fact, I just met her tonight. She's a really nice person and she's new to Laguna. I told her I would show her around this weekend." Alex answered, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice.

"Uh, huh. So . . . This is an . . . obligation kind of thing?" Aurora asked with a slight hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"No, Mom. It's not an 'obligation kind of thing.' I made a conscious choice to ask Samantha if she wanted me to show her around as opposed to coming down to La Jolla for the weekend. There! I said it. Now, I'm ready for the 'we never get to see you' lecture." Alex responded.

"Okay, Alexis. No lecture. I know you have a life of your own. But you do know we love you and just want to see you once in a while. I know we'll be coming up for the Pageant of the Masters probably around the middle of July. You will find some time to go to that with us won't you, Alex?" her mom asked.

"Yes, Mom. I'll do my best to make sure I put that weekend aside -- Are you coming on the weekend or are you going to come up during the week when it's less crowded?" Alex asked.

"We don't know yet, honey, it's according to whether or not Kelley can get the time off. I'd rather come during the week but you know how busy the summer months can be." Her mother then decided to change the subject. "All right, I'm over you not coming down this weekend, so tell me all about this Samantha. Is she a new love interest or what?" Her mother asked.

"Well . . . if it were up to me, she'd most definitely be a new love interest but I don't think she even knows I'm gay. We just . . ." Alex began but was interrupted.

"Alex! You know better than to fool around with straight girls! They can be nothing but trouble for you. What are you thinking? You jeopardize your heart before you even start when you mess around like that!" Her mother chided her.

"Mom, give the girl a chance. As I said we've just met but I Really like her, even if it never goes any further than a really good friendship. I need a friend here in Laguna. Someone close that I can talk to and do things with. And please don't go giving me the 'I'm your friend, Alex' talk. I know you're my friend, but you're my mom first and that can really get in the way sometimes. Just let me sort this out. I promise I will come to you if or when I need help. And I promise to keep you well informed. Is that fair enough, Mom? Let me at least try to act like an adult occasionally, okay?" Alex finished with a plea in her voice that registered all the way to La Jolla.

"Well," her mother started, "She must really be something to have you that much on the defensive after only the first meeting. So, tell me a little about her and where you plan on taking her this weekend." Aurora said with as much compassion as she could muster, feeling that her only child was again heading for disaster in the love department. She hated it when Alex fell for someone who would eventually turn around and hurt her. Aurora simply wanted Alex to find someone who would love her and be good to her. If she had someone like that Aurora could stop worrying about Alex so much.

"Mom, she's about 5'4", and has short blonde hair that reminds you of fairies it's so soft and fine. Her bangs are feathered and she has that girl-next-door look to her. She's built really cute, just right actually, not like a lot of the anorexic bathing beauties that dot the beaches here. And she has a bubbly personality that makes me want to smile just being with her. She has the greenest eyes I think I've ever seen. And her imagination would give yours some competition. She told me a story about the sunset tonight that was absolutely beautiful. Her name is Samantha Riley, so I guess the green eyes come from Irish ancestry. She reminds me of you in that she is or wants to be a writer and maybe after I know her a little better I can bring her down and introduce you to her or maybe if you guys don't mind she can come with us to the Pageant of the Masters -- that is if she wants to."

Aurora thought of interrupting with a question but it seemed that her daughter was on a roll so she just let her continue talking.

"She's really interesting to talk to and she seems to like at least some of the same things I do . . . well . . . she likes the beach and sunsets. Anyway, I really like her and hope we can become very good friends. Maybe, if I'm exceedingly lucky she'll be gay, too. Maybe she's as afraid of scaring me off as I am of scaring her off -- but I doubt that." Alex told her mother.

"Alex," Aurora finally got a word in, "She sounds lovely and I wish you all the luck in the world. Just keep your heart intact until you get to know her a little bit better, okay, hon?" Her mother beseeched her. "Now, tell me about your apartment and the business. How is everything coming along."

Alex described all that had happened in the last week since she had talked to her mother, including the altercation with the construction worker, which got Aurora a little more than slightly upset. She then stated that most of the equipment was already in place and that she was looking forward to opening the doors to the public. She asked her mom if she and Kelley would be coming to the grand opening and Aurora gave her the already assumed affirmative. She further described how the apartment was coming along and told her that it would probably not be fully furnished before the opening of the clinic. She made sure her mom knew that getting the clinic set up right was her first priority and that the apartment took second place. She made Aurora promise not to push her about the situation and in return promised that Aurora could pick out a picture or something for the apartment and that she would not balk about it.

"Well, Alex," her mother finally chimed in, "we've been gabbing for nearly an hour already and Kelley's giving me that 'get off the damn phone' look. So, listen, sweetie, you take care of yourself and call me if you need anything, understand?" Aurora said to her daughter.

"I will Mom. You know I always do. I love you, and Kelley."

"We love you too, Alex. Hey, listen. Before I hang up, I've been thinking . . . you know that Sawdust Art Festival is starting soon there in Laguna, that might be just the place to take your new little friend. What do you think?"

"Mom -- I think that may be just perfect. There is something for everybody there. Thanks, I knew I could count on you to help think of somewhere interesting to go. I really love you, Mom."

"I know, honey, I'll talk to you later. Bye." With that Aurora hung up.

Alex let out a sigh of relief. She always enjoyed talking to her mother but sometimes she could be a bit overbearing, in a loving motherly sort of way. She knew her mom was right about falling head over teacups for a straight woman but in affairs of the heart Alex felt one didn't always have a choice. It would make things a lot easier if Samantha turned out to be gay, but Alex found that the easy way was not usually what she ended up with. Now at least she knew where they would be going this weekend, if Samantha agreed to go. She felt very lucky to have such an understanding Mom, one she could talk to about almost anything.

It was beginning to get late so she dismissed the thought of eating and decided to pour herself another glass of wine. While getting her wine she remembered that she had not told her mom about her decision to cut her hair. *Oh, well. It's always good to leave some things left unsaid. Maybe I'll just wait and let them SEE what I've done.* She giggled to herself as she ran her fingers through what was left of her black tresses. *I don't care what anyone else thinks. I feel like I've shed 10 pounds and five years -- it's cool, easy to take care of and what's most important is that I Like it!!*

Alex walked into the bedroom, mentally reliving the activities of the evening as she undressed, sipped her wine and finally sat down on the bed, watching the movement of the ocean below her

windows. She convinced herself to retire early, well not exactly early but earlier than usual. It had been quite a busy day.

The moon was now high in the night sky as Alex finished her wine. The moonlight streamed across the waterbed and she felt a pang of loneliness as she laid back on the huge bed that she shared with no one. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Alex*, she thought. *Turn around and look at the beautiful view*. She listened to her own thoughts and turned back around to watch the silver light dance on the water as tiny white caps rose, rolled and then broke on the beach. Another beautiful Laguna night. She was blessed to be here in this place of quiet that she loved so much. The only thing that would make it more of a paradise to her would be to have someone special with whom to share the moonlight and with whom to share her life. Maybe if her wish came true tonight, that person would be someone she had just met.

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As Samantha pulled away from the warehouse and out onto the private road she noticed headlights pulling out behind her when she made the first turn off of what would soon be Alternative Paradise Road -- if Jane's rumor was correct. *Funny*, she thought to herself, *I don't think there are any other buildings on that stretch of the road. Maybe someone else found the beach like I did. By the Gods I hope not, I want that beach to stay as private as possible*. She did a double take on that thought.

Well, she did want the beach to remain private -- that's what had attracted her to it in the first place. There was plenty of coast line for others to explore. She had found her quiet place and she selfishly wanted it to remain just that. But slipping around in her mind were other thoughts that she was not quite ready to give voice to so she let them remain elusive and concentrated on her driving.

The ride toward home was short one but there was so much to think about. Samantha couldn't wait to tell Suzanne that she had met the tall, dark-haired stranger from the beach. She never thought she would meet her this soon. She wanted to tell Suzanne just how nice Alex was and how beautiful she was up close and personal. What she couldn't understand was why she felt so damned happy about meeting her and why she was actually missing her at this very moment. She had never had a stranger affect her in such a fashion before.

*Maybe we were friends in another life*, she thought. *That would explain why I feel so good just being around her. Maybe we've been through this all before and that's why we are so comfortable with each other*.

She got the impression that Alex seemed to be as comfortable around her as she was around Alex. The inexplicable element was why she felt such inner warmth when she touched Alex or when Alex touched her. It was more like the kind of a feeling you are supposed to get when you find someone you're romantically attracted to. She actually felt a tingle from her hand to the top of her shoulder when Alex touched her hand reaching for the Dictaphone machine earlier in the evening. At the same time she got that little catch in her throat and throb in her heart that she gets when watching a romantic movie and the two main characters touch. She couldn't explain it to

herself but she was worried more about the fact that she **wasn't worried** about not being able to explain it.

Her stomach rumbled at her and she decided to stop at B.J.'s for a 'to go' pizza and a salad because she didn't feel like cooking at this hour and she was obviously hungry. She should have asked Alex if she wanted to join her for dinner, but as usual wasn't thinking fast enough before she left the warehouse to make the invitation. That would have really made a nice ending to what began as a business meeting.

Speaking of the warehouse, she hadn't even gotten to take the royal tour of the building. She would have to remember to ask Alex to show her around the next time she was there. Actually, when she stopped to think about it she didn't even give Alex her phone number. She thought about calling the office in the morning and telling them to go ahead and give out her number if Alex Dorian called for it, after all she might have some troubles with the machine - *Yeah, right!*

Samantha pulled up to B.J.'s and almost got hit in the rear by a car that was obviously following her too closely and didn't anticipate her pulling over into the loading/unloading zone in front of the pizza place. She got out of the VW and gave the other car a menacing look. *Watch where you're going.* She mentally told the stranger. Sam decided to eat her salad while she was waiting for the pizza to cook. She hadn't realized just how hungry she really was until she actually smelled the food. It only took about 15 minutes and she was soon on her way out the door. As she glanced across the street, she recognized the same car that had almost hit her simply sitting there with the driver inside. *Guess that person has nothing better to do on a Monday night than sit around in front of Pizza Places waiting for cars to tailgate and almost hit.* Samantha sarcastically thought to herself.

She then put the thought aside, got into her vehicle and took off for her apartment. Turning into the apartment driveway she decided to stop and get her mail. *This is useless stop -- nothing but junk as usual. Junk and bills.* She turned to throw some of the mail into the trash can located next to the boxes when she again spotted the same car. *Great, now I have a new neighbor who wants to crush in the back of my car.* She mused to herself. She got back into her car, pulled up in front of her building and parked in her regular spot.

Upstairs in the apartment her message light was blinking and was quite visible in the darkness that enveloped the room as Sam walked in. *Answering machines -- what lovely devices --* Samantha thought as she walked over, turned the light on, put the pizza down and looked at the number of calls she had received. *Only one tonight, good. I'm really not in the mood for going through voice mail.*

She pushed the button and the message began . . . same beginning as her earlier message . . . "Hi, Sammie. It's Mom. I thought you would have gotten back to me by now. I'll be up until around 11 tonight if you want to give me a call. We miss you, honey. Bye."

"Darn," Samantha spoke to the air, "I didn't want to but I guess I'd better call her tonight." She opened up the pizza box and put two pieces on a plate. Then she went and got a large glass of water before sitting down by the phone to call her mother. She had no idea what she was going to



say. She was really getting used to doing things her own way and in her own time. She wanted her folks to visit but she wasn't sure she was quite ready for them to come so soon. July would be here this weekend so maybe with a little fast talking she could get them to put off coming down until the middle of August. That would give her at least another month to get everything squared away and know the area a little better. Not that anyone ever needed to know the area with her father around, he was never shy about asking the locals questions.

"Ok, here goes," she picked up the receiver and dialed home.

"Hello, Riley residence." Her mother answered the phone.

"Hi, Mom. It's me."

"Well Hi, Sammie. I'm glad you got back to me tonight. I was beginning to wonder whether your machine was working or whether everything was all right. Everything is all right, isn't it." Her mother asked.

"Yes, Mom. Everything is just fine. I was just doing a little evening job tonight for my boss. She asked me to deliver a machine to one of our new clients who's opening up a business here in Laguna." Samantha answered her mother.

"Well, what do you think about our coming to visit next month?" Her mother asked.

"Mom, I think the visit is a great idea (Samantha lied) but why don't you wait until about the middle of August. It's not really good to come just when these things open. I think they're better about half way through because all the really big crowds are gone by then and you get a better chance at seeing everything without being pushed around." Samantha told her mother, knowing that her mom didn't like large crowds. She was hoping her statements would delay the early visit.

"Gee, Sammie, when you put it like that I can see that maybe the middle of August would be a much better time to come. It will also give Daddy a little more time to get the itinerary together. You know how he loves to plan everything out so we don't miss a thing." Her mother said with a smile in her voice.

"Oh, yeah, Mom. I know exactly how much Dad loves planning for a vacation. Will Sally be coming with you?" Samantha asked as she thought to herself -- *Oh, Please say YES.*

"If we came in July as we anticipated, she wouldn't be able to take off but if we give a month's notice I can see no reason why she couldn't come with us. It will be a real family reunion then. We miss you a lot, Samantha. Are you sure you're happy living there in California? Don't you miss the lake and the woods?" Her mother asked.

"I miss all of you, too, Mom. And, yes I do miss the lake and the woods but the ocean has a magic all its own and it was a lot easier to make the transition than I had thought it would be. I love Laguna and I know you will too when you see it." Samantha said. "So, Mom . . . why don't you talk everything over with Dad and then get back to me. If I'm not here just leave a message

like you did and I will get back with you as soon as I can. Remember it is summer and there are a lot of things to do here so I am out of the apartment quite a bit when I'm not working."

"Okay, Samantha. I'll talk to Daddy and we'll get the dates set and Daddy will make the reservations for the plane and the motel. I'm getting excited already. Tell me Samantha how do you like your new job?"

"Mom, it's just great. It's like being my own boss. I get my work when I want to basically and have 24 hours to get it back to the main office. If I want to take a day off, no problem as long as I give a little notice. It's great. I'm happy here, Mom -- Really." Samantha stated.

"Well, honey. I'm happy if you're happy. I'll let you go for now, this is costing you a lot of money. Give yourself a kiss and a hug from me and I'll tell Daddy and Sally you said 'Hi'." Her mom said.

"Okay, Mom. I'll talk to you soon. I love you." Samantha ended.

"We love you, too, Samantha. Bye for now." And her mother hung up the phone.

*Well, Samantha thought to herself, at least they won't be coming until the middle of August. I can get all my shit together by then I'm sure. Sam was glad she had used the approach she had on her mother. It didn't make her sound like she just didn't want them coming down yet.*

*I think maybe I'll just turn in a little early tonight. It's been a long day.* Samantha thought.

She finished off the pizza she had put on her plate and put the rest in a baggie and into the refrigerator. Pizza always made good breakfast food as far as she was concerned. Then she went in and took a quick shower and came back into the living to lock everything up. She went to the window to make her evening wish and to ponder on the events of the evening. It was really nice to meet Alex and she hoped they would become very close friends. She needed a close friend in the area. Not that Suzanne wasn't close but she had Danny and he would be coming home soon and then Sam would be pretty much on her own or would feel like a third wheel tagging along all the time with the two of them.

Samantha thought again about calling the office in the morning and telling them they could give Alex her phone number if she happened to call for it. Then she thought again. *Perhaps I'll simply go for another morning swim. I wanted to start doing that on a daily basis anyway. If tomorrow is as lucky as today, Alex will have the same idea and this time I won't have to watch her from a distance.* Well, that certainly settled what her wish for the evening was going to be.

*Star light -- Star bright --*

*Make my wish come true tonight.*

*Tomorrow when I go to sea,*

*Make Alex, also, right there be.*

**Continued in Part 4.**

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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### Part 4

#### Chapter 4

As usual Alex awoke just as the sun was beginning to sprinkle the sky with light and the clouds were starting to turn a soft rose color. Her eyes opened and she smiled. She looked out onto the water, viewing it today with an optimistic heart. She felt light and exuberant and more than ready to tackle anything that life could toss her way. Of course what she really was hoping would be tossed her way was a small human package, perhaps 5'4" tall with a beautiful smile and a truly unique way of looking at the world through emerald-tinted eyes. *Funny*, Alex mused at her good humor, *She was the last thought on my mind last evening and she's the first thought in my mind this morning*. She rolled off the waterbed and practically danced into the bathroom, hoping when she came out she would find Samantha traipsing across the beach toward the ocean. *I think I'll save the shower for after my swim. I'll just wash up a little, brush my teeth and comb my -- by the*

*Goddess!* She looked into the mirror and just for a split second was surprised at the face that looked back at her. Well, not exactly at the face but at the hair surrounding the face. *I guess I will have to look at myself a few more times before I realize that this is now Me*, she laughed to herself. "Well, this certainly won't take long," she laughed again as she picked up a comb and quickly lost trace of all evening tangles. Opening the swimsuit drawer she grabbed an OP suit and put it on. Upon opening another drawer she retrieved a clean beach towel.

Alex walked through the living room on her way to the kitchen and glanced out toward the horizon, hoping to spot her newly found friend. She was a little disappointed when she didn't find her there. *Come on, Alex, give the girl a chance to wake up. Maybe she doesn't rise at the crack of dawn like some people we know*. She decided to give Samantha up to an hour to arrive at the beach and if she wasn't here by then she would go ahead and go down alone -- but it would be so much nicer if she had some company.

Alex proceeded to the kitchen and got herself a cup of morning tea. She really wasn't hungry yet so decided to go back into the living room and read for a little while just to waste some time.

*Let's see, maybe a little Anne McCaffrey this morning, I don't think so. How about some Anne Rice, no -- not in the mood for vampires.* "Shit," she said out loud, "I don't feel like reading!" She turned the CD player on, not remembering the last time she had listened to it or what she might have left in the chamber. The thought of a little music seemed like it might be just the thing to help her pass the next, what -- half hour -- she decided (an hour was way too much time to sit around just waiting).

*Oh, joy! They are waaaay too happy and energetic for me this early in the morning*, she mused as The Village people started singing "Can't Stop The Music." *I guess I was in a retro mood the last time I had this thing spinning.* "Not right now," she told the player as she flipped it off.

Alex went out the kitchen door and across the hall to one of her storage rooms where she still had several boxes of unpacked items. She quickly found the one labeled **snorkeling, ocean and water toys** and opened it. Looking into the box she retrieved two masks, two sets of fins, two snorkels, some NoFog and a beach bag. *Well, if she does show up, it would be better if I had a set for each of us*, she justified to herself. She started picking up all the gear she had thrown on the floor in search of these items and began putting it all back into the box. The equipment remaining on the floor was quickly placed into the beach bag. *I'm ready now*, she thought as she picked up her treasures and went back to her kitchen.

Alex was not much on patience and this morning she was finding it particularly hard to fill in time while waiting for Samantha to hopefully arrive. She nervously walked around the living room trying to decide exactly what she could do to while away the minutes she had restricted herself to before going down to the beach. Her mind was a blank and she was just about to just say the hell with it all when she noticed a Tai Chi video on the bookcase. *Great -- that's a great idea. I'll do a little Tai Chi and stretch my muscles and get limber before going swimming.* Then an even better idea came to mind. *No sense waiting up here all cooped up. I might as well just go on down to the beach and workout. That way I will already be there when she arrives . . . And . . .*

. if she doesn't I'll just go ahead and have my swim. But she was counting on Samantha showing up.

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Samantha awoke with a start. She sat up and looked around. *What in Tartarus is wrong with me?* She thought to herself as she glanced over at the clock sitting on the night stand beside her bed. *It's like 6:00 and I'm awake? This is so unlike me!* She flopped back down, put the pillow over her head and tried to go back to sleep. No use. She rolled over on her stomach and tried again. Still, no use. She finally resigned herself to the fact that sleep was not an option at this point so she proceeded to sit up, put her feet on the floor and get out of bed.

*It's just as well I'm awake, she told herself, this way I can get an early start and maybe I'll get to the beach before Alex. Sure, Sam, she only has to roll out of bed and down the stairs -- you're gonna beat her there -- I don't think so!* Still, she figured if she got there first it wouldn't look like she was only going to see Alex. It made perfectly good sense to her, so she went and got her swimsuit from the bathroom where she had left it to dry yesterday. *I'll just wait until I get back to take my shower. No sense wasting time on that now. I'll only have to do it again to get rid of the salt and sand.* After brushing her teeth and combing her hair, on went the swimsuit and some cutoffs. She pulled her towel down from the shower rod and headed to the kitchen area.

*Breakfast I can also do when I get back, she thought to herself. Then, reconsidering, she opened up the refrigerator, got out the baggie with the pizza in it and took a piece out. Won't hurt to eat this on the go. I'm sure I'll have worked up a pretty good appetite after my swim. There'll be plenty of room for breakfast.* Sam grabbed a cold bottle of water and was out the door.

As she was walking to her car she noticed that the air still had a bit of crispness to it but she hoped that by the time she reached the beach it would be warm enough to swim. If it wasn't, she could just walk along the shoreline and watch the sky change into another beautiful morning. She opened the door to the VW and started to take the top down. Sam loved driving in this weather with the wind blowing through her hair. It was such a free feeling and always produced a smile of contentment; today was no exception. The air was clean and felt great blowing gently on her face. There was just a hint of moisture in air because of the close proximity of the ocean and it invigorated Samantha as she drove toward her special cove.

Yep, just under 10 minutes and she was parked and walking toward the steep steps that led down to the beach. She looked up as she passed the warehouse but decided not to buzz the intercom. She wasn't sure if Alex would appreciate a caller at this hour of the morning and she didn't want to do anything to jeopardize their friendship at this early stage of development. She started down the stairs and at the second landing she distinctly made out a tall, dark, familiar figure moving around in the sand below with her back to Samantha. Immediately, a smile appeared upon Samantha's face and she whispered a quiet "Thank You!" to the granter of wishes. *Well, last night's wish came true, Sam. Make the most of it.* She felt her mouth go a little dry as she paused on the next landing to stand and watch Alex for a minute. She seemed to be doing some sort of exercise that looked to be a form of Tai Chi. *Everything this woman does seems so damn graceful, Sam thought. She swims like a fish and now she moves in the sand like a martial arts*

*expert.* Her eyes took in the graceful figure going through the motions of the Oriental discipline on a lonely expanse of Pacific beach. Her heart began pounding slightly as she decided it was time to proceed further down the steps to the sand and toward her friend. She just hoped Alex would not think it was too presumptuous of her to be coming to the beach every morning. On the other hand, she had come to the beach before she had met Alex -- why would she not come now that she had met her? *Yeah, I would have been here anyway,* she tried to convince herself, knowing full well that she would **NOT** have made it an everyday ritual as she now intended on doing.

When she got to within hearing range of Alex, Samantha called out, "Good Morning. Aren't you the early bird?"

Alex had been so engrossed in her exercise that she hadn't sensed Samantha's arrival. The sudden sound of her voice came as a pleasant and welcomed surprise. She turned and faced her friend. "Well, there are no worms left if that's what you came looking for," she laughed.

"That's okay. I'm not that fond of worms anyway," Samantha smiled back at Alex. "Is that Tai Chi you're doing? I was watching . . . uh . . . well . . . I . . . saw you as I was coming down the stairs and onto the beach. You are so graceful, Alex. You look like you've been doing that for a long time."

"Yeah, you could say that." Alex answered. "I've been at it more than a few years." She then quickly changed the subject, "So, you're an earlier riser, too, uh Samantha?" The dark-haired beauty questioned her friend.

"Not usually, but I've found myself getting up a lot earlier now that I live so close to the beach. I enjoy being here when it's fairly deserted. Early morning and sunset, as you already know, are my favorite times to be near the ocean." Samantha answered trying not to let the emotion of why she was here so early creep into her tone.

"Yeah, me too. And you'll find that this particular cove is almost always empty. Occasionally there will be a surfer or two riding the waves and sometimes people from a little north of here or south of here will reach this area on their walks. Most of the time, though, it's quite deserted and that's why I'm so happy my warehouse was situated right above this stretch of beach." She smiled at Samantha and added, "What better gift to share with a friend but something you treasure so highly."

Samantha just nodded her head and hoped that Alex could not see the blush begin to rise from her neck, encompassing her face and ears. She decided it was subject changing time and chimed in, "So, shall we swim?"

"Sure, that's why we have suits on isn't it? Or did you just wear yours to entice viewers?" Alex asked before she even thought about how it might sound. *Damn, Alex. Watch your mouth. Keep it in your head but don't be letting things like that escape your lips until you know where Samantha really stands.*

"Actually, Alex the only two people on this beach right now are you and I," Samantha replied with a grin, "Am I enticing?" She giggled and ran off toward the water.

Alex gave a nervous laugh, "I think I'll take the Fifth on that question, Samantha," she called after her friend. "It's kind of a Catch 22 for me," she said a little lower. "Hey, wait up I brought some toys." She went over to where she had put down her towel and bag and stood there watching Samantha as she came back from the shoreline toward her. *The morning sun really highlights her golden hair. She looks so happy here,* Alex observed as she smiled at her friend.

"Do you snorkel, Samantha?" she asked.

"Well, I've tried it a little in lakes - just fooling around trying to see the fish and stuff. But most of the lakes are not as clear as the water is here. I guess ocean snorkeling would be a lot different. Does that answer the question? It's like a yes, and no answer." Samantha said.

"Okay," Alex started, "Maybe I should have said, would you like to snorkel, Samantha? Is that an easier question?" The dark-haired woman smiled at her friend.

"Yes -- yes, I would love to snorkel, but I don't have any snorkeling stuff.." Samantha answered.

"Well, I just happen to have come prepared and . . . I . . . always bring along extra equipment just in case I might run into a friend who has forgotten hers," She lied through her teeth.

"Hey, that's great -- I'd really like to snorkel here in the ocean -- that really sounds like fun -- the ocean should be a lot different from the lakes I've been in," Samantha went on nervously and a little out of context. *You're babbling, Samantha. Shut up!* She told herself as she walked over closer to Alex to help her get the gear out of the bag.

Samantha went down on her knees in the sand. "Here, Alex, let me help you get the stuff out of there," she offered as she reached her right hand into the bag to pull out a pair of fins. Simultaneously, Alex had put her hand in the bag to retrieve the other mask. The feel of skin on skin gave both of the women a tingling sensation that ran from each of their hands all the way up their prospective arms. (Of course, neither knew the reaction the other woman was having.) Had Sam bothered to look on Alex's arm or had Alex bothered to look on Samantha's they would have seen identical love bumps making the arm hair stand up like electricity had just gone through each of their bodies.

Instead Samantha simply blushed and looked up into Alex's eyes. She could have sworn she was melting right there on the sand. Again her mouth went dry and she tried to voice an apology, "I'm . . . so . . . sorry. I seem to make it a habit of reaching for the same thing you are reaching for at the very same time." Even as she voiced the apology, she couldn't tear her eyes away from Alex's baby blues.

"Don't worry about it," Alex smiled down at her, relishing in the feel of the smaller woman's touch. "I don't mind a bit. It's not like there was any harm done, we're just getting the toys out."

*Not any harm done, my ass. My heart's in my throat and I am finding it really difficult to breath right now. Samantha, please . . .* Alex's thought was interrupted as she felt Samantha's left hand on her arm and felt the smaller woman begin pulling herself back into a standing position using Alex's body as a balancing tool. *If you keep touching me, Samantha, Alex screamed in her mind, I swear I'm going to end up getting myself into deep trouble.*

"Here, I managed to get these out," Samantha said holding up the fins with a sheepish grin.

*Goddess help me.* Alex almost mumbled out loud. *How am I ever going to get through this if she turns out not to be gay. She sure has a natural way of teasing and if this is just the way she normally acts I am going to have one Hell of a time dealing with it.* She thought this to herself while simply smiling at Samantha and saying, "Thanks, I think I'll just dump the rest of this bag onto the sand and we can each get own stuff out. Does that sound like a good idea to you?"

"Uh - huh." Was the reply from the blushing young woman standing beside her.

"Okay then," Alex began, "We each get one of everything except for the fins and we get two of those, unless you have more than two feet. Now, you know how to put everything on, right?"

"Of course I know how to put these things on," Samantha said a little sarcastically but with a smile. "I know I'm not ocean-learned but this is not scuba gear." With that she picked up a mask and snorkle and sat down back down to put on her fins. "Now I know how those clowns in the circus feel walking around with those huge shoes on," Samantha laughed as she stood up with the fins attached to her feet, flinging sand everywhere.

Alex simply looked over at her and grinned. "Clowns. You are a clown. Put some of this NoFog on your mask and let's get into the water before the morning is totally lost."

With that the two women slowly made their way into water until Samantha was about waist high and Alex had her legs all the way covered. Then they put on the masks and snorkels and started looking to see what underwater treasures the ocean would show to them in the early morning light. They had been swimming around close enough to tap each other, if one of them saw something interesting enough to point out. Since they were in fairly open water there wasn't a whole lot to see but it was still fun looking. To really see some interesting species of fish they needed to be down a little way next to some of the tide pools where all sorts of unusual fish congregated. Alex knew they wouldn't see much on this particular beach but it was just a fun morning for both the women.

After a while they decided to dive into some of the waves and even body surfed a few of the larger ones back into shore. When they felt they had played quite enough for one morning they came out of the ocean, laughing and talking like they had know each other forever.

"That was really fun, Alex. Thanks for thinking about bringing the sea gear down with you. It's funny how the seaweed looks so different when you get up close and personal with it. I hate to say it, but I have to get going. I'll need to check the system pretty soon to see how much work I'll be having today. Jane said it would be kind of slow this week so I decided I could always work a



little later in the evening if I had to. I wanted to come out here this morning. I really had a great time." She smiled at her friend as she began taking the fins off and putting all the stuff back into the beach bag.

"I had a really good time, too, Samantha. I love to come out here in the morning and in the evening, but it is so much more enjoyable when you have someone to share the beauty and the fun with. I'm glad you came down this morning. If you are not in too very much of a hurry maybe we could grab something to eat before you have to take off?" She asked not wanting the morning festivities to end so soon.

"Well," started Samantha, "I had planned on eating something anyway, so I guess it really doesn't matter where I eat breakfast, as long as I do eat breakfast. But I don't have a change of clothes, only some cutoffs to pull over my bathing suit so wherever we go it has to be informal."

"Almost all of Laguna is informal, silly. But if you'd rather we could just throw something together up at the apartment. I'm sure I have the makings of a breakfast somewhere in that kitchen of mine." Alex replied. "The only problem we may have," Alex continued, "is that I'm pretty much a vegetarian so all my "meat" products are soy or tofu based. I still eat fish occasionally but am trying to get away from that too. Is that a problem for you?"

"No, actually I've been well on my way to vegetarianism for the past four or five years. I love most of the Morningstar products. Have you eaten any of the Grillers, sausage patties or the breakfast strips? They're really good. Do you still eat eggs and cheese?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, I do. More than I like to admit actually. I really need to get off the dairy products, but I can't imagine doing without my cheese." Alex smiled over at her friend. "At least California is an easy place for vegetarians, we have new restaurants popping up all over the place. It's very trendy, you know." And she laughed. "Morningstar happens to be my favorite meat substitute company, also, so I should have something up at the apartment that we both like." She assured Samantha.

"Yeah, well at least we know we can both go to the same restaurant and not have ordering problems." Samantha chimed in. "I hate it when I go out with someone and they order veal. I almost fall off my chair and have to practically bite my tongue to keep from giving them a lecture. Not that I care what other people eat, to each their own, but veal -- I just get these visuals of the poor baby calves . . . I don't really need to go there," she laughed and just dropped the subject.

"Okay," Alex said, "Then I guess it's settled, we'll just go on up to the -- you know I keep getting stuck every time I think of what to call my home. It's a warehouse, but it really isn't anymore. It's an apartment, but it's more than that. It's a business, it's my house and it's my home. So, I guess whatever I say will be right. Never boring, uh -- okay let's just go up to my place and see what we can throw together."

With that the two of them picked up their towels and Alex grabbed the beach bag. They walked on up the stairs to the front of Alex's home. Some of the workers had already started to gather

out front so Alex just left the door unlocked for them to come and go as they needed to and the two women went on in and up to the third floor. On the way up in the elevator Samantha asked if Alex would give her a tour of the place. She told her it really looked like it was going to be an interesting business and would she please explain all that would be going on there.

"Was that a climbing wall I caught out of the corner of my eye against the far eastern wall?" Samantha asked Alex as they walked into the kitchen area.

"Yes, they just completed it yesterday and I almost tried it out last night. Have you ever climbed one." She asked her friend.

"No, but I am intrigued by them. It really looks interesting." Samantha continued, "Speaking of interesting, I have some questions about some of the symbols on the front doors. I need to go look at them all again and if you would I'd appreciate you telling me what all of them stand for."

"Hey, no problem," Alex answered, "We can go over them one by one sometime when you don't have to be rushing off to work." And I wish it were right now, she added to herself. She had been rummaging in the freezer and came up with a box of Morningstar breakfast strips. "Here we go, I thought I had some of these left in here. So, we have 'bacon'." She then looked in the refrigerator portion and came out with a grin and four eggs in her hands. "We have eggs! I know for a fact I have bagels and I think I might even have some apple juice. Do you think that's enough to keep us until lunch or dinner?" She asked Samantha.

"Sounds great to me. Bacon, eggs, bagels and juice. That'll do just fine. Can I help fix anything?" Samantha asked.

"No you just sit there at the breakfast bar and look pretty," *God damn it Alex, there you go again. You need to watch what you are saying to this gal. She may take it wrong. Then again, she may take it right and that could get you into even worse trouble.* While she was silently fighting with herself she gave Samantha a crooked smile and began getting the breakfast started.

"Is that pretty as in, enticing?" Samantha said playfully. Samantha Renee, she thought to herself, *you're flirting!*

"I don't think we ought to go there again," was Alex's only answer as she turned back around toward the small blonde. She looked directly at Samantha with a sly grin and an upraised brow. "Breakfast is the only topic of discussion right now."

Before long they were sitting side by side at the bar eating a complete breakfast. It was the one meal Alex was good at cooking. She remembered when she was younger always watching Kelley make breakfast on Sunday morning. She had always wanted to be just like Kelley, so breakfast became her meal to prepare.

"This is simply marvelous, Alex. Thanks. I didn't realize how hungry I really was. Swimming like that always gives me an appetite. Actually, I don't need any excuse to have an appetite. I sometimes think I have that proverbial hollow leg," she said and smiled over at Alex.

"Well, you're very welcome," Alex gave a slight nod of her head. *She had watched as the other woman literally devoured her breakfast. She seems to go at everything with the same enthusiasm -- Full speed ahead,* and she inwardly laughed. "Anything to please," was the voiced response that Samantha heard.

When they were finished Samantha got up to help Alex clear off the bar and help with the dishes. "Hey, you don't need to help with these. I'm just gonna put them in the dishwasher in a little while. I'll just put them in the sink with some water on them and walk you back down to the car. Let me throw a pair of cutoffs and a tee shirt on before we go. I don't like walking around in front of those guys downstairs in my bathing suit, if you know what I mean." Alex made the statement and raised a questioning eyebrow at Samantha to see if she felt the same way about the workers.

"Are you sure you don't need the help. I don't mind helping, honestly. That breakfast was super and I'm totally stuffed. As for the workers, I know exactly how you feel. I hate walking past them at any site. They always look at you as though they are undressing you. It's very disconcerting." Samantha agreed with Alex. "You go right ahead and change, I'll go ahead and get some water running on these dishes." Samantha said as she picked up her plate and headed for the sink.

Alex quickly went into the bedroom and pulled out a pair of cutoffs and a tee shirt. She put them on and splashed on a little Obsession out of habit. Then she went back in to join her friend. It had been a very interesting morning and she wished all her mornings would start with as much fun as this one had already. She hadn't even talked about the Sawdust Art Fair yet and she knew she couldn't keep Samantha hanging around too long, after all she had her work waiting for her at home. But Alex was feeling a little selfish and just wanted Samantha to be able to stay a little longer.

"Samantha, you were wanting a tour of the place, so . . . tell me, ah -- are you busy this evening?" Alex asked as she walked back into the living room on her way to the kitchen.

"No, I don't have anything planned. It's all according to how much work I have waiting for me when I get back to the apartment. I could come back after I was finished if it's okay with you." Samantha said, hoping that was the answer Alex was looking for.

"That sounds great," Alex said. "While I'm thinking about it, why don't you leave your phone number with me just in case I need to get in touch with you. Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah, that's fine with me," Samantha said. "Here I'll write it down on this note pad you have here on the breakfast bar then you can put it where you won't lose it." She looked over at Alex who seemed to be staring in her direction and then looked back down at the number she had just written on the piece of paper.

Alex cleared her throat and walked over closer to Samantha. "If you have to go, I'm dressed and ready."

They walked to the elevator and got inside. As the door was closing Samantha noticed the fragrance that permeated the space around Alex. *By the Gods, she wears Obsession. Such a wonderful smell. Everything this woman does and says sets my head reeling. Damn, Samantha, it's as though you have a crush on her. Get a grip, girl. You're going to get yourself in trouble.* She turned and smiled at Alex and asked what time Alex would like her to come back to the warehouse. Her answer was that anytime would be good, she'd be there the entire afternoon.

"We can go grab something to eat when you get here and then afterward I'll give you the royal tour. How does that sound?" Alex asked.

"It sounds like the perfect way to end a day that started off with a perfect morning." She smiled at Alex.

The two women continued to walk out to Samantha's car and Alex complimented the other woman on the color and make of her vehicle. "VW's are very popular here in California. You're right in style, girl! And that color. Gotta love it!"

"Thanks, Alex." Samantha grinned with pride. "I'm really quite proud of the way she looks. My dad wanted me to have it painted dark blue but I wanted to give her some originality and lavender is my favorite color.

Alex smiled back and thought to herself, *It certainly is your color. You look gorgeous in lavender.*

She watched as Samantha slid into the driver's seat. *All the colors of a perfect day rolled into one. Hair the color of sunshine, eyes the color of a Spring meadow, and sitting in the front seat of a lavender car. The complete vision of a meadow in full bloom -- Back to the real world Alex. You're saying good bye, remember?*

Alex leaned over, putting both her hands on the driver's door. "Okay then, I'll see you whenever you get finished with your work, right?" Alex asked.

"Right," Samantha answered looking up into Alex's eyes and getting caught again. Whenever she found herself looking Alex directly in the face she began to get all flustered and tongue tied. *You really need to get going Samantha, before you make a fool of yourself.* "I'll see you later this afternoon. Bye Alex."

"Bye, Samantha, drive carefully. I'll see you in a little while." She stood there watching as Samantha drove off and waved at her as she turned the corner to head back up to the Coast Highway. *'Til this evening, Samantha. This evening we will have a heart to heart. I can't take this any longer. At least I need to know how you feel about my lifestyle. If it upsets you, I need to know now, before my feelings get to be more than I can handle.* Alex turned around and walked back into the warehouse. She needed to check and see what more needed to be done today and in the days to come leading to the opening of her clinic.

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Samantha drove to the corner then looked back to see Alex standing there, still watching her leave. She waved back at Alex as she turned the corner.

*I feel as though I left something there with her today. Something that I can only retrieve when I go back there and be with her. This feeling is very confusing but at the same time very comforting. It's like the feeling all my old girlfriends used to tell me about when they spoke of the guys they thought they were in love with. Am I feeling love? I don't think so; this is a woman I'm having these feelings for.*

Samantha had never been in a dedicated relationship before, but not from her father's not trying to force one on her. She had lots of beaus that Daddy had set up through his work associates. Her Mom set up dates via bridge buddies who all seemed to have sons just her age or a little older. And Samantha had always been very popular in school, so she never lacked attention from the opposite sex. She just never seemed to have that much interest in them. Her mom always put it off to Samantha's being very headstrong and having unrealistic dreams because she was so dramatic and creative. She told her daughter on more than one occasion that she needed to be more interested in the aspirations of her male friends and less interested in career statements of her own.

Sam had tried to fit into the groove everyone expected her to fit into. She even tried being a little serious about one or two of boys she dated regularly, but she never felt comfortable enough to make a commitment. Samantha just never felt completely relaxed around the young men she dated. She never had the desire to go beyond a friendship with any of them. But she should have been given an "A" for effort. She had even gone so far as to have sex with a couple of them but could never figure out what was so special about it. She couldn't understand why all her girlfriends carried on so about how good it was when they were "sleeping" with this one or that one. To begin with men smelled funny, they had scratchy faces by the end of the day, she found very little she could talk about that didn't have to do with them and then to top it all off sex was not a comfortable experience. When she totally analyzed it, she was just plain disappointed in experiences with men and really had no desire to pursue them as anything more than friends.

Even as friends when she looked back at her college years, the guys who she felt the most comfortable with had all turned out to be gay. They were always fun and could talk on all topics, not just the ones ending with the "B" word - Ball. They knew about fashion and movies and music and she was always comfortable around them and able to be more her true self.

*Damn, Samantha. Maybe you need to look a little further within yourself. Maybe you're not just a fag hag as your girlfriends called you. Maybe You are a homosexual but just never considered the fact. Oh, shit. Is it revelation time or what? Here I am totally mesmerized by this beautiful woman I've made friends with -- what would she think of me if she knew the way I felt every time I was near to her. I think maybe I had better keep my emotions in check. I don't want to lose her as a friend.*

Well, now that she had finished that little conversation with herself she was really confused. She wasn't even sure if she should go back to Alex's place tonight. What if she did something stupid and made a fool of herself. No, she thought that one through a little longer and decided she

would still go. She was looking forward to the clinic tour. She knew she could keep her feelings to herself if that's what the situation warranted.. She was raised to be the perfect little lady and if she had to put that mask on to be around Alex, she certainly would.

She had been sitting in front of her apartment for a good 15 minutes talking to herself and decided that her brain was getting fried. It was time to go in and see if she had any work, not that she was in a mood for working after all that self examination. But, then again, it might just take her mind off Her and put it back onto something practical like being able to pay next month's rent. The young woman got out of her car, deciding to leave the top down because she would be driving again tonight, and walked toward her apartment.

As usual the message light was blinking on her service. *Looks like someone's been busy this morning*, she thought as she looked at the number 4 on her machine. Pushing the play button she heard a familiar voice, full of excitement as Suzanne's statement practically bubbled out of the machine.

"Oh, Sammie, do I have some news for you! But I don't want to tell you on this stupid recorder. So, give me a call." *Okay, that sounds interesting*, she thought to herself and decided to go ahead with the other messages before calling Suz.

Message number two was only about a half hour later. "Samantha, where the Hell are you? I'm sitting here with all this exciting gossip and I can't even get a hold of my best friend to dump it all on. Hurry up and get home and call me." *All right, Suz, I will just as soon as you stop calling my machine and let me get to the phone*. Samantha giggled at her friend's enthusiasm over gossip.

*Must be pretty dicey! Let's see what's behind message number three*, and she pushed the play again. This time she got a second or two of silence and then a gruff voice came on the line with a conundrum, "You're dancing with trouble, watch out." *What in Tartarus! Who would be calling me with a statement like that? Dancing with trouble, I think not. Must be either a wrong number or some kook just dialing random numbers*. She shook off the darkness of the statement and pushed the button again to hear the last message.

"Sam -- damn -- if I have to call you one more time -- I won't -- I'm gonna come and sit on your doorstep until you get your butt home. Call me!" *I'll call you just as soon as I get something to drink because knowing you, it'll be a long while before I get off the phone*.

Samantha cleared all the messages and then went into the kitchen to make a pot tea. Opening the cabinet she was faced with quite a variety of choices and finally settled on the Lemon Berry Zinger. The lemon and the berry sounded good, sweet and refreshing, just what she needed for a long conversation with her friend. Okay, she was ready to go call Suzanne. She had some news of her own to disclose. She dialed her friend's number and waited for her to pick up.

"Hello," Suzanne answered the telephone.

"Hi, Suz. I'm home, obviously. I just went for a morning swim. I promised myself to do that every day as long as I get up early enough and today I did. But, you will never guess who I met!" Samantha started the conversation.

"Okay, I'll bite - who'd ya meet?" Suzanne played along.

"I met that gorgeous tall, dark-haired woman who was sitting on the beach the night we went clamming. It was really weird seeing her and wondering who she was and then meeting her so soon. I knew Laguna was small but I didn't figure . . ."

She was interrupted with . . .

"That's great, Samantha, but I have been waiting for hours for you to get your butt home. I have some really good gossip to tell you," Suzanne interspersed.

"Well, it seems like you can't hold a lid on it, so I guess I'd better let you talk first. I just wanted you to know that she's as nice as she is beautiful." Samantha got in before Suzanne could take over the conversation totally.

"Listen, I'm glad that maybe you found another friend here in Laguna, that's cool. Now, here's the dirt. I found out a few things about one of our soon-to-be clients," Suzanne continued unable to contain her secret any longer. "You know the person who bought that old warehouse you keep looking at would have to be pretty well-to-do in the bucks department to refurbish the whole thing, right?"

Figuring that was her clue to talk, Samantha answered, "Yeah, so?"

"Well that person is a woman and a fairly young woman at that."

Samantha just smiled, knowing she already knew that little tidbit of information. She hadn't thought about the money so much but she certainly knew the owner was a woman!

"The real scoop I found out though," Suzanne went on, "Is that her name Alexis Dorian, she's just a little older than us and she's gay! I mean not that that is anything unusual, especially here in California, but I just thought that was really cool," Suzanne concluded.

Samantha had been standing up getting ready to pour her tea when she hear the next to the last sentence her friend blurted out. Involuntarily, she found her self plopped down in the chair next to the phone - stunned. Had anyone been there to take a picture at that exact moment they would have seen a look of pure astonishment. Her eyes got big, her mouth popped open and she almost dropped the receiver on the floor. "Wow," was the only word that would come out of her mouth. "Gay, huh? Where'd ya hear that?"

"Well," her friend continued, "let's just say I got it from a really reliable source. The person made me promise not to give their name out, but from what I've hear this Alexis isn't a closet case, if you know what I mean. She's been around Laguna for a long time and is fairly well known here.

I just thought you'd like to be filled in too -- and who better to fill you in than me," she added laughing. "Now -- tell me a little more about your new friend."

Samantha swallowed hard and tried her best to keep the nervousness out of her voice. "Hey, she's just really nice and very interesting. In fact, I went for a swim with her this morning, but it has put me waaay behind in my work schedule so I had better get off the phone and call in for my reports, so I don't get too very far behind and find myself having to play catch-up all evening." Samantha blurted out all in one sentence.

"You sound a little flustered, Sam. Anything wrong?" her friend asked.

"Wrong, No! What could be wrong? The sun is out the sky is blue, I'm in one of the nicest towns in Southern California. It's just that I spent more time than I had realized on my morning swim and I'm really behind. But, Suz, I am so glad you were the one to tell me about the new client." *And your timing's just Perfect*, she thought to herself, sarcastically. "I just need to get started. I'll give you a call later tonight or in the morning, how's that sound?" Samantha asked her friend.

"Sounds fine to me. I can understand getting behind; it's a real bummer. So . . . I guess I'll let you go. Maybe we can talk more about this later?" Suzanne said with a bit of confusion still lingering in her voice. "Hey, Sam, you don't have anything against gay people do you? I thought you had some pretty close gay friends when we were in school. You know all those guys that you used to hang around with?"

"No! I don't have anything against homosexuals. You should know me by now Suzanne. I think people should all have the right to express themselves anyway they want as long as they are consenting adults. Don't be Silly! I'm just worried about my job, me being the newest recruit." Samantha said, trying to cover her emotional response.

"Okay, Sam. If that's the case I'll just let ya go. I won't be in later today so maybe we can play catch up in the morning. Bye for now." Suzanne said.

"Bye, Suz. And thanks -- Really -- for filling me in on all the latest scuttlebutt." Samantha told her friend as she hung up the receiver.

Now she didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified. What if she was feeling romantically about Alex? What if Alex didn't want anything to do with her in that respect, on the other hand, what if she did.

*What if Alex feels the same way about me and it turns out to be just a crush on my part like the one I had on Miss Reynolds in the 11th grade. Shit!. I had forgotten all about that until just now. But this doesn't feel like just a crush. Oh, Sam. You are getting way too confused. This is getting very complex.*

She decided to clear her head and get her work for the day. That would keep her occupied until it was time to go see Alex. Definitely she was still going to see Alex, nothing could keep her away tonight. Maybe she would even get up enough nerve to ask Alex about her sexual preference.



Ask in a off-handed kind of way. More likely she would chicken out and come home feeling just as mixed up as she did right at this very minute.

She got her blank tape and dialed up the system number. Then she entered her identification code and the code of the provider she was assigned to today. The monotone recorded voice came on the line, "No new reports, all reports have been assigned. To self- assign please enter the dictator's I.D. number followed by the pound sign." Samantha tried the other provider that she had for a backup. "No new reports, all reports have been assigned . . ."

Samantha decided to call the office and find out what was happening. She knew it was a slow period and was glad they had been busy last week. She was also thankful for the extra money she would be receiving for the little meeting she had with Alex. Imagine, getting paid for doing something she would have gladly volunteered to do.

"Hello, Flying Fingers," came the answer on the other end of the line. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Samantha Riley." Sam started.

"Oh, hi Samantha. Bet I know why you're calling. We have been really slow today and your two providers decided to take the entire week off. I know it's an inconvenience but we really will be picking up again the beginning of next week," the voice on the other end explained with a slight touch of sympathy.

"Gee, I was hoping for a little extra work this week, not a little less. But now, nothing for the rest of the week? Are you sure you can't scare me up a provider who is making someone's week hell by marathoning their dictation?" Samantha almost pleaded. She hated to miss an entire week. She had enough in the bank to see her through for a while but she didn't want to dip into those savings.

"I'm really sorry Samantha. Everyone is slow this week and since you are low person on the totem pole . . . well . . . you know how that goes," came the reply.

"Yeah. I know. Well, I guess that's all there is to it. I'll check back onto the system on Monday," Samantha informed the operator, "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Samantha. I am really sorry. Hey, have you hear the scoop about the new provider?" the woman asked with a bit of glee in her voice.

"Yes. I've already been told." Samantha replied dryly. "Listen, I have to go. Talk to you later. Bye," and she hung up the phone not wanting to hear what the person on the other end had to say about Alex and her lifestyle. Her day was taking a turn she had never seen coming and she wasn't sure how she was going to handle it.

*I hate gossip, she thought to herself. Well, gossip that I don't want to hear anyway. Shit. Now I have no work to do to keep me occupied. Guess I'll just continue to unpack some of these boxes. That ought to keep me busy for a couple hours. Then I'll take a long bath and calm down before*

*heading over to Paradise*, which was the shortened title she had decided to give to Alex's warehouse. She poured another cup of tea, put some music on and started rummaging through the half empty boxes in the living room. It was going to be a long afternoon.

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Alex walked back into the clinic and took a quick look around. Things were really shaping up. She went and picked up a clipboard she had hanging on the partition over by the reception area and started checking off things that hadn't already been checked off. The climbing wall was totally completed and the gym equipment was almost all in. She wrote herself a note to remember to get the waivers for climbers, she didn't want to be responsible if someone got careless and fell, or if there was an equipment failure. The stationary bicycles were due to arrive on Friday and they would complete the gym. She made a note -- Friday -- it reminded her that she needed to talk to Samantha about the Sawdust Fair starting this weekend. She checked off universal gym, Nautilus, stairmaster and treadmill. She continued on through the clinic and headed back towards the swimming and spa area. All the lockers were in, both the men and women's areas, as were the shower stalls, toilet partitions and toilets. Alex checked off that the two Jacuzzi pools had been installed and were ready to be filled. The mirrors and hair dryers were in the dressing areas and the linen closets had already been filled with towels, complimentary soaps, hair products and feminine supplies in the women's room.

*Lookin' good*, she thought to herself as she continued to check off items. The pool area would be completed Friday and they would start filling all the pools on Monday if everything stayed on schedule. She walked back through to the reception desk and put the clipboard back on its hook. Okay, first floor is almost ready to go.

Next stop was the second floor. She got off the elevator and looked around at the low pile carpet that was identical to that on the lower floor. She had chosen a variegated blue/green to compliment and tie in the ocean which could be viewed from the west side of the entire floor. To the left was the area where people could view the climbers either below them or those traveling a little further up to the height of the wall. To the right of the stairs and toward the west were the meditation rooms and the open space she had left for Tae-Bo, aerobics and martial arts classes.

There was another clipboard over on the wall close to the meditation rooms. Alex picked that one up to assess the progress of the second floor. She was still awaiting the supplies for the meditation rooms and she was having an artist come in and do some murals on the walls of the rooms. Facing the north wall she observed that the railing around the open area of the running track was near completion as was the track itself. From here joggers or walkers could view the pool below. And lastly were the massage rooms and lecture rooms on the east side of the building. She went into the massage rooms and checked off: massage tables, towels, oils, diffusers and vibrators. *Good this area is almost complete, also.* Her heart was beating a little faster at the thought of actually being able to open the doors very soon to customers.

It had been almost four hours since she began her inspection and the upstairs area was totally void of workers. She figured they were probably taking a long lunch.

Instead of going back down, Alex decided to go up to the apartment and work on some of her paperwork.

She was getting a little hungry so she decided to call Ruby's to deliver a Caesar salad. It was too much trouble to make it herself. It was always easier to just call for delivery - after all, that's why they invented delivery, wasn't it? While she was awaiting the arrival of her lunch she went through some of her papers and decided what it was she needed to dictate. It would be a lot easier if she just had somebody here to help her organize all this stuff. She always had temps and pool secretaries before to do any letters she needed sent out and to organize her calls. She needed to think about hiring someone to do those things here, now that she didn't have the company's resources at her fingertips. The you've got mail icon was floating all over her computer so she figured she had better go see who wanted what. Sitting down she opened her mail and found that several clients had problems they couldn't possibly deal with themselves. *Okay, guys. Let's see what the big deal is that can't be handled by anyone but me.* She shook her head as she opened up the mail. Looked like four in the urgent category. MaryAnn Ryan in Orlando wanted some advice on purchasing some new equipment - that was an easy one, done in 15 minutes. She was interrupted by the intercom.

"Yes, can I help you?" - she asked into the box.

"Delivery for Ms. Dorian from Ruby's." Came the reply.

"I'll be right there. How much is it."

"\$6.15 Ms. Dorian," the boy answered.

"Okay." Alex said and grabbed some money from the jar on the breakfast bar.

She was down and back up in no time and decided to take her lunch over to the computer rather than spend the time just sitting and eating.

Back at the computer she had three messages left to answer. Number two was another easy answer - not this weekend. It was one of her old friends Marcy in San Diego and she just wanted to go out dancing and didn't have anyone else to drag along with her so decided to chance that Alex would want to go. It would be good to see Marcy again, but this weekend she had plans centering around Samantha.

On to message three - it was Gary Black in Sedona, Az. Another let's do lunch and come visit. He was thinking of enlarging and wanted some ideas. The expansion was a little way in the future so it was not that important a call. Alex wrote him a quick -- we can get together after my clinic opens in a week or two. She added that if things got out of hand before then that he could always give her a call.

The final plea turned out to be a whopper. It was from one of her closest clients, Ray Dreggs. He owned a huge gym in San Francisco and wanted to put in a climbing wall and a couple other new items. He was frantic and needed her advice and for her to come up immediately and help him.

Ray had always been a bit eccentric but he was her favorite and he really sounded panicky. Instead of trying to figure out what to do over the internet she decided this warranted a personal call so went and got her black book. She dialed his office and his lover and partner, Sonny, answered the phone.

"Hello, Sonny," She started, "It's me, Alex. Ray e-mailed me and . . ."

"Oh, Honey. I'm just so glad you called. Ray is going out of his mind. You absolutely have to come up here and help us. We won't take no for an answer," he panicked into the phone.

"Slow down, Sonny. Tell me what's happening. Maybe I can fix it from here." Alex said pleadingly.

"No, no, no, girl. You most certainly can not fix it from there! You have to come here! We've been friends for years Alex and you know when Ray is this stressed over the business the only person that can help him get through it is you. He won't take no for an answer, so I will just have to beg and promise you absolutely anything in the whole wide world just to get your lovely ass up here." Sonny ended.

Alex smiled at the exaggerated speech of her friend but knew there would be no way to appease except to say yes and to go up to San Francisco to see the two of them through this new escapade whatever it turned out to be.

"Okay, Sonny. When do you need me up there?" Alex asked

"Yesterday, Honey," was Sonny's reply to her question.

"Let's get serious here for a minute, Sonny. When do you need me there? Seriously!" Alex stated.

"Alex we really need you here tomorrow and you have to stay over for Thursday. You can go home Friday but we need you for at least two days. Ray has to make some major decisions and he wants you to look at everything and help him decide. So, what's your price, girlfriend?" The smile in his voice was very apparent even over the distance.

Alex thought for a minute and then began, "Sonny, I want two first class airline tickets, a limousine to pick us up at the airport and reservations at the Marriott - Fisherman's Wharf. I want a Bay view out of the hotel window and I want it as high up as you can get it at this late date. You got all that?" Alex quizzed her friend.

"Why, Alex. If I didn't know better I would say someone has gotten into your panties, girl. That doesn't sound like too much of a bill to fill. But you must have dinner with us Wednesday night, promise." Sonny beseeched.

"Okay," Alex agreed. "Wednesday morning bright and early - get us the earliest flight out of John Wayne and the latest flight back on Friday."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay the weekend? We could have a marvelous time! And we could get to know your honey a little better." Sonny chided.

"Listen, Sonny, I don't even really know my "honey" yet. In fact, I'm not sure I can even get her to come with me. I'm just playing all my cards before they are even dealt." Alex replied.

"Okay, Alex. Consider it all done and we'll see you when you get here. Pick your tickets up at the reservation desk Wednesday morning in the airport. I'll have someone call and give you your flight information. And Alex . . ."

"Yes, Sonny?"

"Thanks. You don't know how much this means to me." Sonny sighed knowing that all would be right with his world.

"Your welcome, Sonny," Alex said, "We'll see you Wednesday morning. Bye." She hung up the phone.

*Aren't we the overly confident one!* Alex admonished herself. *What makes you think Samantha will just drop everything she has planned and take a trip to San Francisco with a near stranger? She asked herself. I don't know -- I'm too cute to resist?* And she laughed. She would just have to put it out there into the Universe and hope the 'powers that be' agreed that Samantha should accompany her on this unplanned trip to the City by the Bay.

It was 4:30 already. She somehow had managed to keep herself busy throughout the entire day. Not giving herself much time to think about Samantha. She was sure most of the workers had gone by now so she decided to take a quick look and then get a shower and change before Samantha showed up at the door.

Everything downstairs was as she had expected it would be. All the people had gone home for the day and the supervisor had locked up on the way out. All was secure so she went back upstairs to bathe and get ready for her company.

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Samantha had busied herself emptying boxes for hours. She had the kitchen totally unpacked and most of the living room boxes were now also emptied. She probably could have been done earlier if she hadn't kept side-tracking herself by playing the memory game as she emptied out each box. She went through who gave her what, when and where. When she came upon a box of pictures, putting things away took a back seat as she sat down and went through the entire collection. She hadn't gotten to the cartons in the bedroom and there were still some bathroom items that needed to be put away but if she had been working, none of it would have been done. She considered it a plus that the kitchen at least looked uncluttered. It was getting close to 4:00 and she figured she had better go shower instead of the bath she had planned and get ready to see Alex. She closed up the last box and headed for the bathroom. She figured she'd decide on what to wear while she was cleaning up.

Okay, her hair was washed, legs were shaved, teeth were brushed and she still hadn't decided on her outfit. She had it narrowed down to the green shorts with the white midriff blouse or the khaki shorts with a sports bra and a throw over blouse. It was almost 5:00 and she needed to make a decision. Thinking that she might get to actually try that climbing wall she put on the khaki's, she could always take the blouse off if she went to climb. Then she grabbed a beach bag and placed a clean beach towel and bathing suit inside. The occasion might arise to go for a swim and she wanted to be prepared. She thought about getting something to eat but remembered Alex had mentioned something about having dinner before she gave her the tour.

Finally, she was ready to walk out the door. She had been waiting for this moment all day and now that it was here she was wondering if she should just call Alex and tell her something had come up and she couldn't come. No. That would be silly. She needed to go and play this out. She needed to get a grip on her feelings once and for all. Now that she knew Alex's preference she figured it might even be a little easier, unless she was not at all Alex's type and that could be heartbreaking.

The short drive to the cove seemed to take an eternity tonight as Samantha bounced thoughts back and forth in her mind. Surprisingly, she was not disturbed at her questions of her own sexuality, at least not as disturbed as she thought she should have been. Maybe she had been preparing for this clarity of consciousness for a long time. She had always felt comfortable around gays and this would certainly be a viable explanation as to why. Her reasoning before had always been that she was just a very liberal person. Of course, she was still on a threshold here, this could be just a crush and something that would never come to fruition. Again, she would never know for certain if she didn't take that first step forward. She got out of the car and walked up to the front door. She paused for a moment to get her composure.

*You've gotta learn to crawl first, Samantha. Play it cool! Things will happen the way they are supposed to. Keep in mind that there are no coincidences - everything has a reason. Even though you cannot see the big picture immediately it is all part of the tapestry that is your life. Breathe deeply. Let it out. Now . . . go ahead and push the button.*

Samantha pressed the button and stood there waiting. It was only seconds but it seemed like an hour before she heard the anticipated response. Finally the now familiar voice came through the small box.

"Yes?" Came Alex's usual response to the buzzing of her intercom.

"Hi, Alex. It's me, Samantha." Sam spoke into the speaker by the door.

"Hi, Samantha. I've been waiting for you," came the much friendlier sounding voice. "Let me buzz you in and release the elevator for you. On second thought, just come on in and I'll meet you in the lobby." Alex replied. She then hit the buttons that released the double locks on the doors.

Samantha walked into the warehouse. She had not up to this point been past the stairs and the elevator. Now she walked further into the large reception area and looked around. The view to

the west was almost as nice as the one from Alex's penthouse. The only difference between this seascape and that of the penthouse was the height at which it was viewed. The gym was totally equipped from what she could see. No excuse for flab when you lived in or even near a place like this she told herself. Then she heard the elevator in motion as it came to rest on the first floor. She turned and watched as Alex came out of the elevator.

"Hi. I'm not too early am I?" Samantha asked.

"No, not at all. I've been just kind of kicking back waiting for you to arrive if you want to know the truth." She looked over at the cute little blonde standing in the middle of her clinic and smiled. "Are you hungry now or would you like to do your tour first?" She decided to give Samantha the option.

"Gosh, I hadn't thought about it." Samantha started. "I think I would like to see some of the inside of this place first, I've been trying to image what an Alternative Paradise would be but really have no clue as to what type of business this is."

Alex just gave her a slight smile and walked over closer to her. As she got closer to Samantha she spread her arms straight out from her sides and slowly spun around. "This is my idea of Paradise, Samantha. I have a gym, pool, spa, aerobics arena, indoor track, meditation rooms, massage rooms, lecture areas, a climbing wall and even a juice bar. There is everything here to help take care of a person both mentally and physically. You can get in touch with all areas of your life here in this one place. To top it all off the view is spectacular. She stopped spinning and stood directly before her friend. She looked softly into the bright green eyes that looked up at her from a slightly tilted head and smiled. "I repeat, Sam, this is my idea of Paradise. All that I am lacking is . . . never mind I won't go into that just now."

"Lacking what, Alex? What is this place lacking?" Samantha innocently asked.

"As a matter of fact, right at this very moment, there is Nothing that this place is lacking. Come on girl, let me give you a tour." Alex gently placed her arm around Samantha's shoulder and turned her in the direction of the gym. *Wrong move, girl. She told herself. You were going to keep your hands to yourself tonight. At least until you knew she knew about your lifestyle.* She couldn't very well remove her arm now, that would seem odd. So, they continued to walk with Alex's arm draped comfortably and as casually as she could muster around the shoulders of the smaller woman.

Samantha had felt her breath catch as Alex gently placed her arm around her shoulders with her hand resting on Samantha's right arm. She tried her best not to let her knees buckle when she realized that the arm was going to stay there on their trek to the gym area.

It didn't take very long to point out and explain the gym equipment. Most people were fairly savvy on that type of stuff today and Samantha was no exception. Not that she had been much into using the equipment but she knew what it was and usually what it did. What she was really interested in was seeing the climbing wall.

"Alex, could we go over to the climbing wall? I've never seen one before and it looks really neat!" Samantha asked.

Alex took this opportunity to release Samantha from the shoulder hold, feeling now it would not seem so awkward. "Sure, it's on the east wall, as if you could have missed it when you passed the elevator and stairs." Alex answered her friend. "Come on we'll go take a look - up close and personal."

While they were walking over to the wall Samantha started jabbering on about how she would love to try climbing something like the wall but didn't want to do it when there were all kinds of people around. She felt a little inept and didn't want to make a fool of herself. Alex, of course, took Samantha's confession as an opportunity to inform her that she was here now and that the entire building was void of people save for the two of them. She went on to tell her that she, Alex, was the owner of this establishment and this situation could be repeated as often as Samantha wanted, especially if that was the only way she could enjoy the climbing wall.

"You know, my dear Samantha, it pays to know the right people." Alex smiled at her. "And being friends with the owner of the climbing wall is definitely knowing the right person." She laughed as they were now standing directly in front of the very colorful wall.

Alex stood there watching Samantha take in the wall and thinking to herself that this special person was bringing out the best in her already. She enjoyed talking to Samantha. Talking had just been a necessary way of communicating with clients for the past few years and she usually didn't discuss anymore than was necessary. But this small woman made her want to open up and discuss all the things that had been pent up inside her for so long as well as all the niceties of life. Samantha was going to be good for her; she knew that already.

"Are you a good climber, Alex?" Samantha asked bringing Alex's attention back to the wall.

"I'm not bad," was the reply. "I haven't had a lot of experience yet, but I certainly plan to. With this type of wall I can change the routes on a monthly basis. That way people don't get bored climbing the same wall every time." She informed her friend.

"Wow. This is great. Do you think maybe I could try it out with just the two of us here tonight?" Samantha ventured. "You can say no, if you're not comfortable with that, I don't want to be pushy," she peppered the end of her statement.

"Yeah, I suppose you could try your hand at climbing," Alex decided. "I'll spot you. I've already got the top ropes attached and anchored. That closet over there has all the equipment in it. Let's get you out a harness and do you think you'll need gloves?" she asked Samantha.

"I don't think I'll need the gloves. I probably won't get that high." Samantha said.

Alex went over and got out a harness and brought it back to Samantha. She began walking back toward her friend when she noticed that Samantha had taken off her over blouse and was now only clad in her shorts and her sports bra.



*Damn it Samantha. You don't make things easy for people do you.* Alex mused to herself.

They walked onto the well-padded mat that had been placed directly beneath the wall and extended out almost five feet to soften any falls for the free climbers. Alex held the harness open for Samantha to step into. She could smell the fragrant odor of the other woman's perfume as she stepped closer to Alex, putting her small hands, one on each of Alex's shoulders, for balance. They got the harness pulled up around Samantha's waist and Alex helped her secure the closures in front. She then pointed out the areas on the harness that would be attached to the top ropes. As her fingers brushed the smaller woman's waist area Alex hoped that Samantha wouldn't see that her fingers were shaking slightly. *So, close, Alex told herself, she is so close to me I can feel her breath on my face. I can smell the blend of fragrances that are her perfume and her shampoo. If I don't get her going up that wall soon, I'm definitely going to make a fool of myself tonight.*

"Well, here ya go. All tied up and ready to climb." Alex informed Samantha. "Now just start down here where the holds are really easy to reach and begin going up. Take a look at the wall first to figure where you want to start and see how close the holds are to each other. I'll be right below you as a spotter. The rope is there to hold you if you loose your footing or fall."

"Okay, here I go. Now you will be there if I fall right?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, I'll be right here. You'll do just fine. I'm sure of it." Alex replied.

Samantha looked at the formations of all the holds and decided that right in the middle of the entire wall was where she would start her ascent, the angles seemed to be gentler there. She took hold of a coral colored hold and began pulling herself up. "This is fun!" she said looking back at Alex after she had achieved a little height. She went on a little farther and looked back down again just checking to make sure Alex hadn't moved.

"You're doing just fine, Samantha. But, I wouldn't venture too far the first time. Getting down from too much height can be a little scary and I don't think you would make it all the way to the top on your first try." Alex advised her friend.

Samantha started to go just a little further up and missed her footing on one of the holds. It was her first slip and she was a little insecure about going on any further. "Maybe you're right, Alex. Maybe I should start down now. So I just kind of push away from the wall a little and let the rope do the work?" Samantha questioned.

"Yes, just do it slowly, Samantha." Alex warned.

With Alex looking up and watching, Samantha started to push away from the wall. It seemed that just as her full weight began to be placed on the top rope the anchor gave way and the rope gave out. Samantha had already released her grip on the climbing holds and was starting to fall.

Alex had promised Samantha she would be there and she most definitely was, all the time cursing the fact that she hadn't personally inspected each and every one of those damn top rope anchors. Her reactions as usual were exceedingly fast, thanks to all her martial arts training. She

caught Samantha well before she was in danger of hitting the floor and getting herself a good bruising. Samantha's natural reaction was to throw her arms around Alex's neck, happy to be having her fall broken by strong, muscular arms instead of a cushioned mat. She looked up into the eyes of her hero and froze. *By the Gods, Alex. You are beautiful.* Was the first thought in her mind. I feel as though I belong in these arms of yours. *Oh, Please Alex -- kiss me!!* Of course it was only thoughts, but the emotions were definitely playing out on the face of the small blonde.

Alex had acted out of pure instinct, catching the smaller woman with no trouble whatsoever, but now the trouble was that she didn't want to put her down. She was enjoying this moment -- holding Samantha in her arms. *Oh, Sweet Goddess, let this be the right thing to do -- I can't wait any longer; the temptation is too great.*

Alex slowly bent her head lower, keeping a steady gaze into Samantha's green eyes, looking for any sign that the smaller woman wanted her to stop. Samantha was not giving that sort of signal. She was making no attempt to get down from Alex's arms and was just as intently staring up into Alex's eyes.

Alex brought her face closer to Samantha; she could smell the sweetness of her breath as it escaped her partially parted lips.

*It's now or never Alex -- you might as well complete this scenario and make your move. At least you'll know for sure where you stand and be able to take hold of your life from there.*

Funny how a millisecond can seem like an eternity when you are making a life altering choice. Alex resigned herself to follow her heart. Her lips ever so gently brushed those of the golden-haired beauty she was holding so protectively in her arms. She heard Samantha let out a soft sigh as their lips touched. The contact lasted only a second or two, but the sweetness of Samantha's lips was like honey to her soul. She brought her face up from the kiss and started to apologize, although she couldn't explain to herself why. She had done exactly what she had intended to do. She had kissed the lips of an angel.

"I'm sorry, Sam . . ." she started.

A surprising gesture from Samantha stopped her in mid-sentence. The smaller woman's fingers touched Alex's lips in an attempt to silence the rest of her confession. Alex wasn't sure of the response she was going to receive from Samantha, but she certainly never expected what happened next or the words that came out of Samantha's mouth.

"Sorry for what, Alex? I think I've been waiting for this moment since I first laid eyes on you. Don't you ever be sorry for making wishes come true," she whispered to the taller woman standing in the dimly lit room holding her so tenderly in her arms. With that Samantha slowly raised her face up to where their lips could once again touch. This time the kiss became more passionate and the embrace stronger. Looking at them from a distance, one would have seen a statue that Aphrodite would have been proud to have had in one of her temples.

Thoughts drifted through Samantha's mind. *By the Gods Alex, you don't know what you're doing to me. I think everything inside me has just tumbled upside down and is slowly floating back to where it belongs. I'm in the arms of an angel.*

Alex was also having unspoken thoughts -- *Sweet Heaven, don't let this be a dream. Please don't let her just be teasing me.*

Alex gently lowered Samantha to the floor and the two women stood facing each other. Samantha's arms were still around Alex's neck. Neither one of them seemed able to move, nor did they want to. Alex looked down at Samantha with an almost puzzled expression.

"Samantha . . . you do know I'm gay?" She almost whispered.

"Yes." Came her reply. "I just found out this morning."

"So, I take it you are, too?" Alex asked with baited breath.

"I never was before." Samantha answered. "At least I never knew I was."

"And now?"

"The only way I can answer that is to say I have this incredible feeling inside. I have been mesmerized by you since I first laid eyes on you. Maybe I need to try that kiss again . . . you know, just to be sure." Samantha answered with an impish grin and a sparkle in her eyes.

"Your wish is my command," Alex smiled as she placed her hands on either side of the smaller woman's face. "Samantha, you don't know what you're doing to me," she whispered, covering the blonde's lips with her own. She could feel Sam's lips slightly parting, allowing Alex's tongue to explore her soft sweet mouth. Their tongues intertwined and the intensity of the kiss was the ignition of a passion that neither of the two women had ever experienced before. Alex instinctively slid her hands down Samantha's face and neck to gently graze the area of the small breasts. Her fingers teased the soft warm skin that lay above the scant material of the sports bra. Samantha moaned in ecstasy. Alex opened her eyes. Somehow her fear of either hurting this woman or being hurt by her rose up even through the magic of the moment and Alex gently broke off the kiss. "Samantha -- we need to talk before . . . before we do something we both may regret."

"But, Alex . . ." Samantha pleaded.

"No, we really need to talk." Alex said.

The haunting look in those clear blue eyes made Samantha know without a doubt that there would be no changing of Alex's mind. The only way they could go forward would be to know exactly what each one of them expected from this relationship from this point on.

Alex took Samantha's hand, "Come on Samantha, let's go up to the apartment." She picked Sam's blouse up off the floor and handed it to her and the two women walked in silence to the elevator.

When they got inside the elevator Alex used her key and then turned back to Samantha. "Let's get upstairs and have a glass of wine and we can talk some things out. Samantha I really don't want to rush you. I'm so afraid . . ."

"But Alex . . ." Samantha started again.

"No buts right now -- we'll talk in a minute and get everything laid out on the table. Samantha, if I hadn't stopped down there . . ." the elevator came to a rest at the third floor. The door opened and they got out, walked across the hall and in through the kitchen door. Samantha went directly into the living room and stood in front of the window. Alex came over and put her hands on Samantha's narrow shoulders. "We'll talk, okay and figure the best way to go from here. I'll get us some wine." Alex softly kissed the top of Samantha's head and went to the kitchen.

It was slightly cool in the room and Samantha felt goose bumps travel down her arms but she was sure the cause was not the small breeze but the kiss that had just be placed upon her head. She looked up at the open windows and was thankful for the breeze coming through.

When they were reconstructing the building Alex had them leave the louvered windows all across the top of the glass expanse on each floor so they could be opened when the weather was permitting. Today had been one such day and she had opened all of them and had the fans going. A fresh ocean scent permeated the room.

Samantha just stood there looking out. They had spent a couple hours downstairs and again the sunset was almost there for the viewing; in less than an hour the sun would be dropping below the horizon. *I'm standing here with Heaven within my grasp and somehow I'm scaring her away.* She turned around and grabbed four of the huge pillows sitting over in the corner of the room and placed them nearer the window so they could sit and talk. She took off her shoes and socks and tossed them toward the bar along with the blouse that she had yet to put back on. *If we're going to be sitting on the floor talking the least I can do is be comfortable.* Then she pulled over a small coffee table to hold the wine glasses.

Alex walked back over to Sam and handed her a glass of wine. "Here ya go," she said as she sat down cross-legged in front of Samantha and gave her a sheepish smile. "To more nights than we can ever imagine," she toasted the lovely blonde seated in front of her and clanked her glass on Sam's. They both took a sip and then there was silence.

After a minute Alex began. "Okay. I guess it's only fair that I start. I stopped downstairs Samantha because . . .I'm . . . afraid -- things can get out of hand so quickly and . . . I don't want this . . . to be just a . . ."

"Alex. I know you probably think I don't know what I'm doing and don't know what I want. But I do." Samantha interjected. "There's no reason for you to be afraid. You aren't forcing me into anything . . ." was all Samantha got out before Alex was again speaking.

"Samantha it's not just for you that I'm afraid. Your starting something that is so entirely new to you. It could be like a game. I'm just as worried for me and my feelings. I don't feel like this is just a fling for me. I've had my share of one-night-stands, believe me. I know how I feel when I don't want to get involved. I also know how I feel when I do. If I were to start this, Samantha . . ." She watched as Samantha lowered her head and sat looking at her hands.

"Sam, I'm really scared of getting hurt. I've had my share of love gone bad on me and my last relationship turned me pretty cold. I only know that if I hadn't stopped when I did downstairs, there may have been no turning back. I'm terrified you wouldn't feel the same."

Alex paused just long enough to hear a small sob escape Samantha lips. She reached over and took Sam's chin in her hand, gently lifting it up and gazing into misty green eyes. "Oh, Samantha," she said as she brushed away a falling tear with her thumb, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry. Please don't. You're breaking my heart," she drew the smaller woman close. "Oh, fuck," she said in a whisper, almost to herself.

"Okay," Samantha whispered back as she pulled away from Alex with a slight smile on her face.

"Samantha, your priceless," Alex said.

"Alex, I don't think you are just a flirtatious interlude for me. I know I've never been in a relationship with a woman before. In fact, I've never really been in any relationship before. I've never wanted to. I've never had any desire to. No one has ever made me feel the way you do. I can just look at you and my day is complete. You make me smile deep within myself."

Alex opened her mouth to speak but Sam put her fingers on Alex's mouth and quietly said, "Hush, now, Alex. Let me finish, please."

She then continued, "Alex, I can't say I will never hurt you. No one should ever make that kind of a promise to another. But I do know that I will never intentionally hurt you and if you don't give me at least a chance -- then neither of us will ever know." She finished her monologue and gave a deep sigh. Picking up her glass she took a large drink and then looked back out the window, her head facing slightly south and her eyes again filling with tears about to be spent.

Alex moved over a little closer as she took Samantha's glass from her and placed it on the table. Then she turned the smaller woman back around to face her. "So. Samantha Riley," she said very slowly raising her left eyebrow and smiling a crooked smile. "Would it be alright with you, if I made love to you right here and now -- right here on the living room floor while the sun is starting to set?"

"Oh, Alex . . ." Samantha started to say but was cut off as moist lips covered her own.

Alex placed a hand on Samantha's back and slowly lowered her from her seated position to lying on the floor with her head on one of the throw pillows. She laid down beside her and rested on an elbow as her other hand traced circles in the skin of Samantha's midriff. Then Alex slowly switched positions and straddled Samantha across the stomach, placing both her hands at the

base of Samantha's sports bra, gently lifting it over the smaller woman's breasts and up over her head. With this movement her face went down next to Samantha's ear and she whispered softly as she traced the outside of Sam's ear with her tongue. "You are absolutely breathtaking. I'm going to make you mine Samantha."

Alex sat back up and removed her polo and bra. She gingerly kissed Samantha on the cheek before unstraddling her and sitting on the floor to take off her shorts and underwear. Out of habit Alex had already kicked off her sandals when they walked through the kitchen door. She turned back around to face Samantha and smiled as she caught the expression of desire on the smaller woman's face.

Slowly and with a feather-like touch Alex traced Samantha's face with her fingers as she gently kissed her cheeks. She then let her hands travel slowly down to Sam's small, round breasts. Smiling she felt the nipples harden under her gentle touch. Alex nibbled her way to Sam's ear, down her neck and ran her tongue around the soft area of each breast, not neglecting to take each firm nipple in turn into her mouth and suck it softly.

"I won't bite, I promise," Alex stopped long enough to tease, "At last not hard."

Her hand continued its journey down Samantha's supple body, reaching the stomach where she adeptly unbuttoned and unzipped Samantha's shorts and slid them and her under panties off. She drew circles in her lover's skin and watched as love bumps covered every inch of Samantha's abdomen. Alex continued to travel down Samantha's body encouraged by little moans and groans of pleasure as her hands gently parted Sam's legs, running soft fingers up and down the inside of her thighs and smiling at the other woman's reaction. She gently laid her body on top of the smaller woman's and began to lower herself toward the blonde mound below Samantha's abdomen, kissing and caressing every inch of the unexplored territory. Her mouth came to rest on the folds beneath the curly hair and her tongue explored the moist region within with a sudden urgency. Samantha let out a sound that could only be described as a purr. Alex looked up and smiled as her tongue continued and its movements increased in speed and pressure. She watched as Samantha eventually grabbed at the pillow under her head and squeezed it until her knuckles seemed to turn white. She knew Samantha was stifling her sounds and Alex played her like a virtuoso plays a well practiced instrument. Finally, Samantha could hold in the sounds no longer and screamed in rapture. "Alex, oh . . . oh . . . Alex!" She tightened her body and tried to pull away. "Alex!" she insisted as she placed her hands on Alex's shoulders. It was at this point that Alex placed one, then another long, muscular finger slowly into Samantha's inner sanctum, a place where no woman had ever touched her before. The penetration ignited sparks that set off quivers of sensation all over Samantha's body.

Alex pulled her body up, placing her left arm behind Samantha's back in a lover's hold. She looked down into a face so filled with love that she felt herself trembling for want of touching it. She softly kissed Samantha; then brushing Sam's cheek with her lips, she breathed softly into her ear and whispered. "I'm going to make you mine Samantha."

"You already have," was her lover's response.

Alex wanted to watch the expressions on Samantha's face as she made love to her for the very first time. She wanted to see the ecstasy as her fingers began to work their magic. "Let me have all of you, Sam. Don't hold back." Alex stated.

Alex's motions increased in speed and thrust as Samantha's body reacted to their movements. The women were locked in a lover's embrace. Occasionally Alex could feel Samantha's nails biting into the skin on her back. *I know, my love, the best is yet to happen*, she thought as the pressure of the nails only made her more amorous.

Alex could feel her own body responding to that of the smaller woman's lying beneath her. She knew instinctively that when Samantha reached her climax they would both be equally satisfied and she knew at this moment that she wanted no other love in her life but the one she now held in her arms. The undulating of their bodies was similar to that of the waves performing the same rising and falling motions just outside the window. They were in total sync with each other. Opposite sides of the same coin.

Sounds arising from Samantha's lips encouraged Alex to continue. Moans of utter satisfaction began coming in short . . . quick . . . spurts, beginning softly and then proceeding to increase in speed and volume.

"By all that's holy, Alex - take me." Samantha almost shouted. "By the Gods Alex," - she sighed and let out short quick exclamations of desire, her breath getting more and more shallow as the speed increased.

"Come for me Samantha," Alex pleaded. "Give me all of you . . .

Sam let out a cry and then tensed all over.

Alex could feel Samantha pulsating. She could feel the moistness of her lover increase as she held her position, hard and firm and still. She could almost hear Samantha's heart pounding, matching that of her own.

Alex continued to hold her tightly in an embrace, "Samantha, you're beautiful." She looked down and saw a tear of pure joy trickle down Samantha's face as the smaller woman, completely spent, relaxed her entire body and looked up to gaze lovingly at the woman who had just given her pleasure like she never had imagined existed.

"Alex," Samantha started, "I don't think you'll ever have to worry about my hurting you. No one -- no one has ever come even close to making me feel the way you do. I didn't know my body contained reactions like you just elicited." She smiled tenderly at her lover. "I love you, Alex. I've never said that to anyone before. I know it may sound funny, us knowing each other for such a short period of time, but I feel like I've known you forever."

"I feel the same way, Samantha," Alex confessed.

"Alex," Samantha queried, "Are you still aroused? I feel so selfish not to have asked before. I . . ."

"No. I'm okay, Samantha," Alex answered, "I climaxed when you did." She smiled and brushed Sam's hair away from her face. "Let's just lay here and watch the sun finish setting."

Alex rolled over on her back with her head on one of the pillows and Sam rolled toward her putting her head on the chest of the taller woman and an arm around her waist. Samantha fit quite securely into the niche under Alex's arm, and it seemed as if the two women had been designed to fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. They continued to lie there, holding each other and listening to the soft sounds of the waves filtering up from the beach. They were bathed in the crimson light of the sunset as the sun finally kissed the sea goodnight. There were no words to express their feelings at this moment and they laid there, each in the arms of her new found love. Both of the women were happier at this moment in time than either of them could ever remember being

Continued in Part 5.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Laguna Nights ~ by Carole Giorgio

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## Part 5

### Chapter 5

Alex finally broke the silence, "Samantha, I've never made love to a straight woman before . . ." she began, staring out the window at the ocean.

"Alex, I don't think I was really a "straight woman." Samantha started.

"So, you're a lesbian now?" Alex smiled as she turned her head to look at the blonde. "I thought you told me downstairs that you . . ."

"I told you I never *knew* I was gay. I didn't really have any sexual persuasion. I knew I didn't feel anything when I was having sex with a guy, but I never thought it was because I was gay. I never gave myself that option. I had lots of gay male friends in college but . . . I guess I was just stupid in the sex department." Samantha said.

"I don't think stupid is a word I would use to describe you, Sam." Alex interjected.

"Alex, no one has ever made me feel like you just did and I don't mean only physically. I was just as emotionally involved in what was happening between us. I think I've been waiting my entire life to meet you." She lifted up on one elbow and looked at Alex. "Do you believe in love at first sight?" She asked innocently.

"If you had asked me that question two weeks ago, I would have laughed at you and said absolutely not! I would have told you that I believed in soul mates at one time but that my dreams had been crushed as far as even that connection was concerned. But, now -- I'd be more inclined to say, Yes. Yes, Samantha I think I do believe in love at first sight. There is no other way to explain the feelings I have for you. I guess I never thought that someone like you would come along and touch me as deeply as you have, especially in such a short period of time." Alex replied solemnly.

"I believe, Alex. I honestly believe that there are no coincidences and that everything happens for a reason. You and I were on the same beach at the same time so we could begin to feel the magic between us. I never knew I was a lesbian before . . . because . . . I was waiting to meet you. I wasn't a heterosexual either. I had tried that and it didn't seem to work for me. Before you, I didn't fit in anywhere. Alex, I believe we were destined to be together," Samantha continued and her eyes sparkled as she spoke.

"Well then, come here, my destiny," Alex grinned as she pulled the smaller woman back down into a tender embrace and kiss.

Samantha, now lying on top of Alex, had the advantage and allowed her right hand to begin exploring the taller woman's body. She ran her fingers down from Alex's face across the broad shoulder to the well-developed arm. She continued down the arm, reaching Alex's fingers. From the tips of the fingers, she went in reverse and moved her hand over to Alex's strong, muscular

thigh, up to her waist and finally to her breast. Samantha could feel Alex's skin responding to the tender caresses. When she touched Alex's breast, Samantha let out a soft moan of pleasure. She didn't realize that touching another person's body could be so sensual to her, too. The sound was not lost on Alex and she took that opportunity to switch positions and place the smaller woman beneath her once again.

"No fair, Alex! I want to make love to you this time," Samantha whined.

"Not right now, my destiny. I have an important question to ask you before it gets too late. Actually, it may already be too late." Alex replied with a hint of dismay in her voice.

"You sure know how to ruin a mood." Samantha said, "Okay. What?"

"Damn! I don't know where to start. Let's see. I know this is more than just short notice, it's impossibly short notice, but I was going to ask you much earlier this evening, until I got otherwise distracted," she smiled. "Samantha, have you ever been to San Francisco?"

"No." Was the reply. "I've always wanted to go but have never had the chance. Why?"

"Well, I have to go to San Francisco very early in the morning and am staying until Friday night. It's business, mixed with a little pleasure because of the clients I'm going to see. I was going to ask if you could call in and tell your boss that you couldn't take any work for the next couple of days and go with me. There . . . that's it in a nutshell. So . . . is it too late for you to call in and ask for time off?" Alex asked with a plea in her voice.

"Actually, I was told earlier this evening that there would be no work for me until Monday," Samantha grinned. "But Alex, I can't afford that kind of luxury right now. I really don't have a lot of extra spending money." Samantha continued with a hint of sorrow in her tone.

"Sam, I'm not asking you to pay for anything. The tickets have already been purchased. It was part of my fee for going on such short notice. I figured if you said no, they could get something back on the extra ticket, but if you could go, I wanted to be prepared. It's business, so it's all paid for." Alex stated.

"But Alex, I'm not part of your business." Samantha said.

"You will be for the next couple days, if you want to go with me. What do you say? Want to go to the City by the Bay?" Alex invited.

"I'd be a fool to say no," Samantha accepted. "Yeah, I'd love to go with you. Anywhere," she added with a smile and gave Alex a hug, which was graciously received and topped with a kiss.

"I'm glad that's settled! The answer was just the one I wanted! Now -- we have to get up and I have to call and see what time the flight leaves in the morning. They should have called me by now." Alex said slightly perturbed.

She got up and helped Sam up from the floor, pulling her close. "We really need to get some clothes on before we have an instant repeat of what happened just a little while ago. I loved making love to you Sam," Alex said as she planted another kiss on the delicate lips in front of her. "San Francisco can be a very romantic city and I intend to see that it lives up to its reputation."

"Nothing could be more romantic than being here with you, totally naked, in front of this view," Samantha whispered. "But San Francisco sounds enticing and I will get my turn to make love to you. You will have to take into consideration that I have never made love to a woman before, but I'm a quick study and I know what feels good to me." Samantha teased as she ran her hands tenderly over the small of Alex's back, feeling the taller woman's muscles tighten under her touch.

Alex released her hold on the smaller woman. "No more teasing right now; we have got to get dressed." Alex laughingly scolded. She picked up her clothes and dressed as she walked toward the

kitchen, noticing that the answering machine was blinking with two messages to be retrieved.

"Well, I guess maybe they did call with our flight information," she said out loud. "I must have been otherwise occupied and didn't hear the phone." She grinned. "Did you hear the phone ring, Samantha?"

"Yeah, right!" The blonde giggled a reply as she continued to dress.

Alex pushed the play button and listened for the messages. The first message was a gruff sounding muffled voice that was almost indistinguishable, "What do you think you're doing!" was all that was said before the sound of a loud slam, as the receiver was obviously banged down.

"What the Hell?" Alex grimaced at the transmittal. "Kooks!"

Samantha looked over toward the kitchen, thinking that the voice sounded vaguely similar to the voice she had heard on her phone the other night, but she decided not to say anything to get Alex upset. Nasty sounding voices all had a way of sounding alike she convinced herself.

The next announcement was from the airlines, calling to confirm the two first class tickets on a United Boeing 757 at 7:48 a.m., leaving from John Wayne Airport and arriving in San Francisco Airport at 9:00 a.m. The operator confirmed the flight number and the departure gates and told Alex that the itinerary would be waiting for them with the tickets at the check-in desk.

"Okay," Alex said, after she had written down all the information. "That gives us about 9½ hours to get everything together and get to the airport. That includes sleeping time. How do you want to do this, Samantha?"

"Well, right now I'm very hungry, how 'bout you?" The small blonde answered.

"Yeah, me too. So . . . what if we order a pizza and have it delivered. You go pack. I'll pack here. Then you can come on back and put your car in the garage. If we are both here at the apartment, it'll make it a lot easier to get started. We need to leave about six a.m. Would you mind staying over?" Alex asked and then added, "I don't want to be presumptuous."

"No, that sounds good. I don't have any problem with staying over. But what should I bring to wear?" Samantha asked.

"Casual is good for the flight and for sightseeing around the city. You may want shorts for the daytime and jeans at night because sometimes it can still get cool in the evenings, even in the summer. Most definitely you will want something fancy for dinner tomorrow night. Knowing Sonny, we will be dining elegantly." Alex chimed in.

"Oh, dressing up is a bit of a problem right now, Alex. I'm not sure where my dressy dresses are in my stuff. I haven't unpacked them all yet. They were not on my important list of things to unpack. Maybe I'd better not go." Samantha said a little disappointed.

"Don't be ridiculous. That just gives us a reason to go clothes shopping. Don't worry about a thing. It'll be a lot of fun. All I ask is that I get to pick out your outfit." Alex smiled and continued, "Do you trust me enough to do that?"

"Sure." Samantha began. "I would trust you enough to pick out the outfit, Alex. After all, I can see you have exquisite taste," she said grinning and winking, "you picked me out." Her tone then turned a little more concerned as she started to object, "But, I couldn't let you pay for it."

"Sure you can. I want to Samantha. Come on, don't spoil my fun." Alex said beginning to pout. "I have a huge business expense account and if my "secretary" -- you don't mind if I dub you that for the next couple of days do you? -- needs some proper attire for a business dinner, well . . . that's what the account's for." Alex ended with a firm look in Samantha's direction.

"Okay," Sam agreed, "If you insist. But I still feel a little funny about it."

"I wish you wouldn't feel that way. It'll be fun shopping for an evening dress. I don't wear them so I don't get to see all the new fashion statements. Besides, I want to see the look on Sonny's face when he sees you all decked out in something I helped pick out." Alex explained.

"All right." Samantha, gave in, again. "Since you put it that way, who could argue with you?" She grinned at Alex and then continued, "I'd better get started. It shouldn't take me too long to throw the casual stuff and toiletries in a suitcase and my suitcases are still in the bedroom so they're handy. I could probably be back here in about 45 minutes. Does that sound okay?"

"That sounds perfect," the taller woman responded.

Standing side-by-side the two women looked at each other and smiled. Alex bent down and kissed Samantha gently on the lips. "Sam, you feel okay with what transpired earlier this evening?" Alex asked trying to make sure that she wasn't rushing the relationship.

"I feel more than just okay, Alex. You felt wonderful and made me feel so loved. I'm not sure how to go on from here, but I do know that I want to be as much a part of you life as you want me to." Samantha said looking deep into the sapphire eyes that were staring at her.

"Samantha, that really makes me happy. I'm afraid I may start to take over your life. I feel so alive when you're with me and we've only known each other a couple days. This is very unusual for me. I'm not one to jump into relationships before having my emotions thoroughly thought out. I hope you want to be as much a part of my life as I want you to be. I'll try not to overwhelm you." Alex said smiling at the smaller woman.

"Unfortunately, we really don't have the time to talk now but we will in the next couple of days as we get to know each other a little better. Right now we need to get going or neither of us will get any sleep tonight. I'll walk you down to your car and then I'll come back up and call B.J.'s. What kind of pizza do you want?" Alex asked.

"Oh, a Veggie Works is fine with me or just plain cheese, I'm easy to please." Samantha said.

"Yes -- as a matter of fact, you are." Alex grinned.

They proceeded to leave the apartment, go down in the elevator and out to the front of the building where Samantha's car was parked. Alex waited until Sam started the car then leaned over and gave her a light kiss goodbye. "I'll see you in a little while, Samantha, be careful going home."

"I will. I'll be back as soon as I can." Sam answered. She put the car in gear and drove away while Alex headed back inside the building.

Neither one of them saw the dark figure on the first landing of the stairs leading down to the beach. The landing gave a perfect view of the front of the warehouse and of the two women saying goodbye to each other.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was 9:30 by the time Samantha got back to the building. Alex had given her a set of keys to use for getting back into the warehouse but had seemingly forgotten to give her a key to the elevator. Sam buzzed the apartment before unlocking the doors. Alex only took a few seconds to answer.

"Yes?" Came the voice that Samantha could not get enough of hearing.

"Alex, you forgot to give me a key for the elevator. I thought I'd better buzz you before I got inside." Samantha said concerned.

"Just come on in, Sam. I had the electrician fix the call box inside the elevator so that I could release it from up here as well as using the key. I thought of everything." Alex replied with a smile in her soft contralto voice.

Sam opened the doors, went inside and over to the elevator. She opened the elevator door, stepped inside and looked over to where the key went. There was a surprise waiting for her. An entire set of keys for the building, including the key for the elevator, was hanging on a heart-shaped key ring. A note was attached to the wall in beautiful calligraphy -- To My Destiny.

Samantha smiled and felt her eyes fill with tears of joy. *I think I found the woman of my dreams*, she thought as she took the keys in her hand and held them to her heart. The ride up seemed to take forever.

The kitchen door was ajar and Samantha walked in and placed her suitcase next to Alex's to the left of the door. Soft jazz was coming from the surround sound speakers and the room was filled with a sweet fragrance. The room was dimly lit and she could see the flickering of candles over in the dining area.

"Alex, I'm here" she exclaimed.

"I'll be right there," came the answer from the bedroom. "Go on into the dining room if you want."

Samantha went in and sat down, noticing that the table was set with wine, candles and pizza. "How elegant," she said grinning. "A romantic Italian dinner."

Alex was suddenly there with her hands on Samantha's shoulders, "Best I could do on the spur of the moment," she said as she kissed Samantha on the top of her head.

"Here are your keys back - I guess I won't be needing them with a set of my own." Samantha began. "The note was beautiful, Alex."

"Well, I can't be running up and down in the elevator every time you need to leave the building now, can I? I had that extra set made for my folks. I'll just have to make them another." Alex responded with a smile on her face. "I'm not going too quickly for you, am I, Samantha?" She continued with a small wrinkle of worry on her forehead.

"No, I really don't think you could move too quickly, Alex." Samantha answered.

Alex sat down and they toasted for the second time that evening. "To the beginning of a beautiful relationship," Alex stated.

"To the beginning of a life full of wonders," Samantha added.

The rest of the dinner was uneventful as they talked a little about San Francisco, what Samantha wanted to see and where Alex wanted to take her. Three days was not a very long period of time to spend in the City by the Bay, especially if it was your first visit. But Alex was good at making every minute count. She filled Samantha in a little about Sonny and Ray and told her that she was sure she would like the two of them and that she was positive they would like her. Alex said that the business portion of the trip would probably only take up a few hours on Wednesday and

a few on Thursday and that the rest of the time would be theirs to do as they pleased. She loved the look of wonder that appeared on Samantha's face as she told her of the things they would be seeing and doing in San Francisco. Before they knew it, they had finished all the pizza and the bottle of wine and it was almost midnight.

"Well, I guess we'd better get some shut eye or neither of us will be worth a damn tomorrow." Alex finally said. "Samantha, I keep running into awkward moments tonight. Again, I don't want to take anything for granted. I don't have the guest room set up yet but if you want, you can have my bed and I can sleep out here on the floor . . ." Alex started.

"Don't be silly, Alex. I can sleep on the floor. I wouldn't think of taking you out of your bed." Samantha insisted.

"Already you're not letting me finish my sentences," Alex continued smiling, "I was going to say . . . or you could share the bed with me."

"Sharing's good," Samantha smiled.

"Sharing it is then." Alex concluded.

Samantha started over to her suitcase to get her pajamas.

"If you want, you can just wear one of my nightshirts tonight, Sam, that way you'll have a clean one tomorrow night. I'll put it on the bed for you." Alex told her as she walked into the bedroom.

"Thanks, that'll work. I'll just get out my toothbrush," Samantha replied.

Alex went into the bedroom, pulled out a clean nightshirt and laid it on the bed. She went into the bathroom, brushed her teeth and put on her own nightshirt. By the time she came back out Samantha had already changed and stood there looking like a little girl in her mom's nightgown. The shirt that came to Alex's thighs came to the middle of Samantha's calves. Alex had to smile at the sight.

"What? You've never seen someone in a shirt that's waaay too big for them before?" Samantha laughed as she threw her hands up in the air. "This is certainly not a one-size-fits-all, now is it?"

"I think it looks just fine. The *'I'm in my mom's nightgown look'* is a good one on you," Alex laughed as she motioned to Samantha that the bathroom was all hers.

Alex set the alarm for five to give them plenty of time in the morning to get ready. The lights were all off, but the room was softly illuminated by the moonlight. The stack of CDs was only about half finished and the music filtered softly through the bedroom speakers. Alex laid back on her pillow and waited for Sam to come out of the bathroom.

Samantha finally came out and waited a minute to let her eyes become accustomed to the lack of light, then she climbed into bed next to Alex. She lay there on her back feeling rather

uncomfortable because she knew what she wanted to do, but didn't know if she should. At the same moment the two of them rolled over, Alex onto her left side and Samantha onto her right. They were facing each other. Alex brought her right hand up under Samantha's chin.

"Are you really tired Sam?" she whispered.

"Not really, are you?" Samantha asked.

Her only answer was a tender kiss.

Alex knew they needed to get some rest and that the next few days were going to be hectic, but more than she wanted sleep, she wanted Samantha. It had been years since she felt anything for anybody and never in her life had she felt like she was feeling tonight.

"Samantha, I want to make love to you again. I can't seem to get enough of holding you, touching you, kissing you." Alex said as she placed her hand under Samantha's nightshirt and caressed the soft skin beneath.

"I feel like I belong here beside you, like I have finally met the other half of my soul. I know it sounds crazy but while you may have been waiting all your life for me, I've been out there searching for you." Alex continued to confess, as Samantha kissed her tenderly on the neck and face.

"My mom always told me exactly what you said earlier," Alex went on, "that there are no coincidences and that we are all where we need to be when we need to be there. I'm just glad we were both in the same place the other day and I feel as though my search is finally over."

"Oh, Alex. You make me feel so . . . oh, Alex." Samantha tried to verbalize.

"Hush, my destiny, just relax and let me lavish upon you all the love I have been holding back just for you." Alex whispered as she lifted Sam's shirt over her head and then slipped her panties off. She continued to make love to Samantha with a complete repeat of the evening's earlier activities. When they were both totally sated and all their energies had been spent they fell asleep, again the position of comfort seemed to be with Samantha's head on Alex's chest and her arm around Alex's waist. The sounds of soft jazz had been replaced by the melodious ebb and flow of the ocean far below and their breathing seemed in sync with all around them.

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Alex was the first to awaken, even before the alarm sounded. She affectionately glanced down at the still sleeping beauty she held, and smiled, remembering the activities of the night before. Carefully, so as not to disturb her lover, she slid her arm out from under Samantha and placed the smaller woman's head on the pillow. She got up, turned the alarm off so it would not play, went into the bathroom and came out with a terrycloth robe on. She was about to leave the bedroom when she heard Samantha roll over.



Sam was trying to place her arm back over the Alex who was no longer there. Sensing the absent partner she stirred and opened her eyes. She looked around disoriented at first and then spotted Alex in the doorway.

"Hi, Sleepy head," Alex smiled.

"Hi, yourself. What time is it?" Samantha asked in a still sleepy voice.

"It's almost five. I was just going in to make some tea. Want some?" Alex asked.

"Sure, just let me get something on and I'll be right there." Sam answered as she rolled out of the waterbed. "Guess we have quite a day ahead of us, huh?"

"We surely do. But we started it off in a most satisfying way," Alex smiled. "After all we didn't get to sleep until today was already started. You felt marvelous, Sam."

"Alex, you were the one who felt marvelous!" Samantha corrected her.

"Whatever - I guess the feeling was mutual." Alex laughed.

"Yes, but one of these nights, very soon I might add, you're going to let me make love to you!" Samantha added emphatically.

With that statement from Sam, Alex turned back toward the kitchen. She didn't want Samantha to see that she was starting to blush. She didn't blush often and was unaccustomed to other people being able to read her emotions. She wanted Samantha to make love to her, but was positive that once she had, she would not let the smaller woman go. She was still afraid of making another commitment and perhaps even more of being hurt again.

*Who do you think you're kidding!! She chided herself, You know damn right well you are already committed to this imp of a woman who just spent the night in your bed!*

She continued to the kitchen and Samantha went into the bathroom. A small quick breakfast and almost an hour later they were out the door and heading down the Coast Highway toward John Wayne Airport. They had put Samantha's car in the garage and Alex had left instructions with the supervisors to have all the ropes and holds checked and double checked on the climbing wall. She left an entire list of what she expected to be done by the time she arrived back on Friday and had left her mobile phone and the hotel number on the bottom of the list. It was not that long a drive and they arrived at the airport 45 minutes before the scheduled arrival of their plane.

"Well, it looks like the plane will be here on time." Alex stated. "I didn't even ask you, do you like to fly, Samantha?"

"Oh, yeah. I love to fly. I once thought about getting my pilot's license but it was too expensive," Samantha answered.

"Well, we'll have to rectify that if you really want to learn. I have my license. It's not that difficult and I have a friend who owns a flying school. I'm sure we can get her down to a fair price." Alex smiled at the smaller woman by her side.

"Really, Alex? That would be great!" Sam stated enthusiastically. "Hey, they're announcing the arrival of our plane, we'd better get over there." Samantha said as she pointed in the direction of the arrival gate.

"All passengers in rows one through 10 may now board the plane." The stewardess announced over the speaker.

"I guess that's us, Sam." Alex said as she placed her arm inside Samantha's and ushered her down the gangway to the awaiting plane.

The stewardess greeted them and showed them to their seats in the first class cabin.

"By the Gods, Alex - we're in first class! I've never ridden in first class. This is great! Look at all the room we have, and I hear they serve hot roasted nuts in ceramic containers, and you can have all the drinks you want." Samantha excitedly babbled on.

"I don't think we'll get nuts this early in the morning, but we probably could if you really wanted them." Alex laughed at Sam's exuberance. "I think we'll probably get a muffin and a piece of fruit." Alex informed her traveling companion.

It took about 30 minutes and they were up in the air and on their way to the City by the Bay. Alex had ordered two mimosas from the stewardess when she had brought them their muffin and fruit cup.

She picked up her glass and gave a toast, something she was getting used to doing with the beautiful blonde sitting next to her. Samantha picked up her glass as well.

"Here's to a marvelous three days in San Francisco with the most beautiful traveling companion a gal could ask for." Alex hailed.

"I can ditto those exact words, my love." Samantha smiled at her. "San Francisco, open your Golden Gate, you'll let no lovers wait outside your door." She continued with her own words.

They touched glasses and sipped their drinks. Each of the women was looking forward to getting to know the other better. This was the perfect beginning to a relationship of a lifetime.

Continued in Part 6.

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by Carole Giorgio

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## Part 6

### Chapter 6

The flight to San Francisco was a short one and the gals were a little giddy upon arrival, having had two additional mimosas before the plane landed. They were met outside the baggage terminal by a limousine, just as Alex had requested and whisked off to the Marriott to unload their suitcases and get settled in.

Alex was recognized immediately at the front desk of the hotel and welcomed. She signed in and arranged to have a rental car delivered to the hotel garage for the time of their stay. The bellboy took their luggage and showed them to the room. He opened the door onto a beautiful suite overlooking the Bay.

Samantha's eyes lit up like a child's experiencing Christmas for the first time. She went directly to the window and looked out. "It's beautiful, Alex. And look," she continued as she scanned the room with her eyes, "There's a fruit basket, flowers and champagne. You must be a very important guest here? First we get picked up in a limo and now this! We've stayed at some fairly nice places on family vacations, but we never got amenities like this!" She continued into the other room. "Oh, look a Jacuzzi tub in the bathroom! This is going to be great!" She looked over at the dark-haired woman who was standing by the door smiling at her.

"I've probably been here enough times over the last ten years to have bought this suite. But, it is nice to be appreciated, isn't it." She beamed at Sam. "Come on, let's get settled in. I need to give Sonny a call and let him know we've arrived. He expects to see me a little before noon. Do you want to join me or stay in the room and rest up for your shopping trip this afternoon?" The taller woman asked smiling.

"Why don't I just stay here and get all our stuff put away and check out the hotel. I'll just be in the way at your meeting and feel like a third wheel." The smaller woman answered.

"Sounds like a deal to me. When you get hungry just dial up for room service or if you want to, go down to any of the eating places. I've already arranged for either one of us to be able to charge anything purchased in the hotel to the room. I should only be a couple hours, the gym isn't far from here," Alex concluded as she picked up the phone and dialed her client.

"Hi, Sonny. We're here and all in one piece." She waited smiling as Sonny went through his little song and dance about how happy he was she was here and how he couldn't wait to meet her new friend. When she had about enough of his gibbering, she interrupted with, "Sonny, I'll be there in about 15 minutes. We can continue then. I have to take Samantha shopping this afternoon, so the sooner we get started the sooner I can get back here." She waited for his response, said goodbye and hung up the telephone.

"Okay, I'm all set. How 'bout you?" she asked Samantha.

"Sure, I'll be just fine. I've got plenty to keep me occupied until you get back." Sam answered.

"I hope you can shop quickly. We'll only have about four hours to shop before we'll need to get back here and get ready. Knowing Sonny he probably has an eight o'clock reservation. He prefers late dining."

"No problem, I'm not that fussy when it comes to clothes. I'm not a real shopper's shopper." Samantha smiled over at Alex. "You go ahead and do what you need to. I'll be just fine." She added as she walked over to where Alex was standing and gave her a hug. "Thanks for bringing me, Alex. This is going to be a marvelous few days. I just know it."

Alex hugged her back and tilted up her face to give her a kiss. "I know it too, Sweetheart. I'll make sure of it." She said as she hugged her one last time and started out the door. "Make sure you keep this locked, you're not in Laguna now," was the last bit of advice she gave before closing the door.

Samantha looked after her and sighed then spun around the room barely able to contain her happiness. "Hello, Frisco, Hello." She sung to the window. "I won't leave my heart here, but I'm sure I'll make many pleasant memories."

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Alex walked into Ray and Sonny's establishment, Eternally Buff, and went directly over to the receptionist. "Hi, Tommy. It's been quite a while. Have you been keeping those two in line?"

"Hi, Alex. It's good to see you! What did you do to your hair? It looks fabulous on you. You look great, girl, something must be going your way." The young man said with a friendly handshake. "You want me to buzz Sonny or you want to just go on in?"

"I'll just go into the office. He always makes such a fuss -- it gets embarrassing. Is Ray here, also? I need to see the two of them together this time," Alex said.

"Yes, I think he's upstairs. Do you want me to have him meet you in Sonny's office?" The receptionist questioned.

"No. That's okay, I just wanted to make sure he was in the building. I think we will all be going up to the second floor. I'm here to check out the new climbing wall specs." Alex informed him.

"Oh. Okay, Alex. It's really good to see you," he said as he picked up a ringing phone and waved her on.

Alex knocked gently on Sonny's door but didn't wait for an answer. She opened the door and spotted her favorite client sitting with his back to the door doing what he did best, talking on the phone. He spun his chair around to admonish whoever it was who had entered his private domain without permission, until he saw Alex standing in front of his desk looking down on him, a crooked half-smile on her face.

"I'll call you back later. Gotta go. Important business just stepped into my office. Bye." He quickly ended his telephone conversation.

"My God, Girl. What have you done to yourself?" He almost screamed. "You cut off all your hair!!! Turn around. Let me see." He kept on as he motioned for Alex to give him a better view of the entire haircut. "I have to say that it suits you just fine. You are one lucky girl, Alex, being able to wear that mane of yours any way you choose." He giggled, patting his slightly thinning head of blond hair. "So, did you come alone or do you have someone waiting outside for me to meet?" He questioned his old friend.

"Samantha stayed at the hotel," Alex answered. "She wanted to wait until this evening to meet the two of you. I'm afraid she doesn't know what she's getting herself into, hanging around with me." Alex smiled at her friend. "So, shall we go take a look at this new endeavor of yours?" she asked with an upturned eyebrow.

"Sure, sure. Ray's upstairs right now with one of the representatives of the company your firm subcontracted to do this for us. We talked to Marge first, but you know we would much rather have your input on such a large investment. Ray wants it to take up the entire length of one of the walls and he wants to put in a skylight on the ceiling." Sonny went on. "But, let's just go on up and we can all talk there." He grabbed Alex's arm and strolled with her out of the office and over to the elevator.

Ray was upstairs talking to another man when they arrived. He glanced over and saw Alex and Sonny walking in his direction and did a double take. For all the years he had known Alex she had never changed her hairstyle; it had always been long and flowing and down to the middle of her back. The gorgeous six-foot-tall woman walking beside his lover had a completely new look. He didn't think any hairstyle would look bad on Alex, after all she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, but he was pleasantly surprised to see that this new look was even more stunning than her old one. On top of that, there was a difference in her walk today, a lightness that he was not used to seeing. She actually looked happy and he had not seen that look on her face for more than three years. He smiled broadly at the two people approaching him and waved them on over.

"Alex, you look marvelous," Ray began the conversation as he gave his friend a hug. "I love your new hair cut, it really fits you," he continued. "I hope you had a good flight up and thanks for coming on such short notice." Then he turned his thoughts to business. "So, has Sonny filled you in on all that has been going on up to this point?"

"Hi, to you, too. Thanks for the compliment. The trip was very smooth. And yes, Sonny has pretty much filled me in. It looks like you have things clearly mapped out up to this point. What exactly do you want me to look at and why the urgency, Ray?" Alex asked.

"It's just that this is such a huge endeavor, Alex. I want to make sure we have everything right and your opinion has always been crucial. You know what you're doing and we want to make sure that we are doing the right thing. So, why don't we all go down to the office and hammer the details out until I no longer have this empty pit feeling in my stomach when I think about this change," Ray said. He turned to the other man and said something about seeing him again in the morning then the three friends went back downstairs to Sonny's office.

After they had been hashing over measurements, equipment and costs for almost two hours, Alex told her friends that she really needed to get back to the hotel. "I'm not alone, remember?" She started, "I told Samantha I would be gone only a couple hours. We really have to do some shopping for tonight. Sonny, what do you think about taking her down around Union Square, there's a Neiman Marcus in that area if I remember correctly?"

"Yeah, Neiman Marcus is there and so is Saks and Macy's. You should be able to find something out of all of those, unless this new little sweetie is hard to please." Sonny chimed in.

"Sonny, don't get catty. I don't think Samantha will be hard to please at all. In fact, I'll probably be the one who is hard to satisfy," Alex said smiling at her friend.

"Now let me get our schedules coordinated before I take off." She turned to Ray and asked, "You'll need me here at what time tomorrow? And how long do you think it will take?"

"I'd say be here right after breakfast and we can probably let you go by lunch time. Then we can do the same thing again on Friday and everything should be . . ."

"Wait a minute," Alex interrupted. "Sonny told me I would only be needed for two days. I promised Samantha I would take her sightseeing all day Friday."

Ray gave Sonny a look and Sonny in returned shrugged his shoulders and gave Ray a weak smile. "Okay. I see how this is playing out." Ray went on, "Alex, I really need you here Friday. Everything should be in place and we will need to go over the finishing touches. I have the people all set to be here all three days starting at eight o'clock sharp so that it can all be completed by Friday. But . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence as Alex was giving him a look that would have dropped anyone other than a friend dead in their tracks.

"What's the big deal, Alex? Why don't you just let Sonny change your flight back home to Sunday night instead of Friday? I know your people can't be working on your clinic over the weekend. That would give you two extra days to do your sightseeing excursions. Does your friend have pressing business down in the Laguna that can't wait until Monday?" he asked.

"Ray, I don't know. I have to talk this over with Samantha. First I asked her to come up here on the spur of the moment and now you want us to stay another two days. I can't keep changing plans on her without first asking her opinion." Alex sighed.

"Oh, come on girl," Sonny chimed in, "If she can't be flexible with you she can't be much of a keeper."

"Watch that mouth of yours Sonny, you're already in deep shit. Don't make me come over there and do something we'll both regret." Alex said giving him a look that made him rustled through the papers on his desk looking busy.

"Alex, don't get so touchy. You know how Sonny is." Ray interjected. "But wouldn't it be nice if we could all go out Saturday night and just relax? You know like we used to -- have some fun. We could go down on Polk to some of the bars or go to Castro.

"Hey, guys, go easy. Samantha's just come out. Castro might be a little too much for her this first weekend," Alex started to protest.

"Nonsense, silly girl." Sonny came back into the conversation. "We'll find a nice little drag show to take her to and loosen her up. It will be a scream. Come on, Alex. For old time's sake. We haven't seen you have a really good time since you dropped that bitch Nikki years ago."

The sound of Nikki's name turned Alex's blood cold. No one had mentioned her to Alex since the breakup - it just wasn't talked about. The fact that she wasn't jumping down Sonny's throat at this very minute was a big step forward. She thought about their suggestions and it really did seem like a waste to go back to Laguna for the weekend when they were already up here in San Francisco. She was sure that Samantha would love the idea and so decided to say yes for the both of them.

"Good!" Sonny said putting his hands together. "Now, we'll see the two of you at 7:30 tonight. We'll pick you up at the hotel."

"And where is it that we are going?" Alex wanted to know.

"I have reservations at this marvelous restaurant called Mecca. You'll just love it. It's very 1930's and has this unique oval bar. The food is Mediterranean and it tastes great. It'll be fun." He beamed at her.

"Okay, Sonny, 7:30 it is. You know where we are. We'll be ready. At least I'll be ready. I don't know how Samantha is at being on time." She smiled at her friend, turned and walked out the door.

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It didn't take her long to get back to the hotel. She stopped in the lobby gift shop for a little something for Samantha then went on up to the suite.

Alex tried the door before using her key, a habit she had gotten into from all the time she spent on the road. Satisfied that the door was locked she used her key and went inside.

"Samantha," she called as she opened the door, so as not to scare the other woman. "It's just me. I'm back."

"Hi, Alex." Came the reply from the other room. "I'll be right there."

Samantha came into the living area and directly over to Alex to give her a hug. Alex walked over meeting her half way and held out a single lavender rose. "A gift from my heart," Alex smiled as she handed the rose to Samantha.

"It's absolutely beautiful Alex. I've never seen a lavender rose before. Thank you." She took the gift and gave Alex a hug and kiss in return. "I'll have to find a vase for this," she continued as she turned and walked toward the kitchen. "I missed you today, but kept myself pretty busy. I put all our stuff in the drawers and closet. Then I went down and checked out the gift shops, the pool and the gym. This is a really nice place." She looked over at Alex and smiled.

"I'm glad you had enough to keep you occupied," Alex said. "I hope the time went by quickly for you. It flew for me. All of a sudden I looked down at my watch and it was time to leave. I was right about dinner. The guys are going to pick us up at 7:30. Sonny made reservations for 8:00." She walked over to Samantha and put her arms around the smaller woman's waist. "So, are you ready to go do some serious shopping?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm ready. Do you need to freshen up or anything before we go?" Samantha asked looking into sparkling blue eyes.

"No, I'll shower when we get back. Did most of the clothes hang okay or do I need to have the suit pressed off?" Alex questioned Samantha.

"I think it looks fine. It was one of the first things I hung up. Nice suit," Samantha answered.



"Thanks." Alex told her looking down at the smaller woman she was holding. "Now, if I can just let go of you we can be on our way." She leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on Samantha's lips. "If we stand here much longer, you will be going to dinner tonight in shorts." Alex said then grabbed Samantha's hand and started toward the door.

Samantha picked up her purse from the couch as they passed and they were on their way to Union Square.

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They made it back from shopping with plenty time to get ready. Alex had been right about Samantha being easy to please. They had looked at a couple dresses, but each time Alex found something wrong with them. She was, by her own prediction, more difficult to satisfy. There was nothing in Neiman Marcus that she liked so they walked over to Saks. They had barely entered the evening wear department when Alex spotted the perfect dress for Samantha. Sam took a look at the price tag and balked as Alex took it off the rack.

"I'm not even going to try something on that costs that much!" Samantha frowned at Alex.

"Oh, please," Alex pleaded. "It's you," she said making little pleading gestures to the small blonde standing with her hands on her hips. "Come on, humor me."

"Oh, okay," Samantha grunted as she took the dress from Alex's grasp. "I'll try it on, but I know I won't like it and neither will you." She finished as she walked into the changing room.

When she reappeared, Alex's face lit up, her eyes opened wide and she let out a soft, slow whistle of approval. "Samantha, this is definitely the dress for this evening." She smiled at the vision before her. Samantha was standing there in a shimmering metallic knit, the color of which was about two shades lighter than the green of her eyes. The dress was ankle length with a side-slit that showed her shapely thigh. The neckline was softly scalloped and there was an added accent of embroidery on the front and the shoulders of the dress. The finishing touch was a matching shrug.

"Look in the mirror," Alex motioned to Samantha. "Tell me you don't like what you see."

"I already have looked, Alex. I looked in the dressing room." Samantha countered. "I think the outfit's wonderful and I love the way it looks, but it costs too much!"

"No, no, no!" Alex insisted. "My decision. The company's paying so don't worry your pretty little head over it. It's a done deal, Sam. The dress is yours. Now all we need to do is get you some shoes and stockings and we can head back to the hotel." The look on Alex's face was a clear signal to Samantha that there would be no more discussion.

Samantha started toward Alex to give her a hug and stopped just as she was about to put her arms around her.

"Samantha, this is San Francisco." Alex smiled at her. "You want to hug me, come here, hug me." And she took Samantha into her arms for a short 'you're welcome' hug.

"Damn," Sam said, "I would have thought nothing about hugging Suzanne or one of my other girlfriends but when I started toward you I had this funny feeling come over me. I don't know why . . ." She searched for the right words.

"Don't worry about it. California is a lot different from most of the other states especially where gays are concerned, and San Francisco . . . well . . . everyone knows we run the show here." Alex laughed at her embarrassed lover.

"Listen," she continued, "I need to go over to the jewelry department and get the catch on my watch tightened. You go ahead and change and I'll meet you over there. We can pay for the dress at any of the counters." She turned and walked away while Sam went back into the changing room.

They had passed the jewelry counter when they first entered the store, on their way to the dress department and a necklace had caught Alex's attention. She had gone back over and purchased it when Samantha went into the changing booth for the first time. It was a medium sized yin/yang (the Chinese symbol of the combination of cosmic forces that together bring about balance and all that is meant to be in the universe) in the shape of a heart. One side was done in black mother-of-pearl with a small white pearl inlay and the other side was done in white mother-of-pearl with a small black pearl inlay. The entire symbol was framed by tiny diamonds and it came with a silver chain. She hadn't had time to look at the dangling earrings that matched it, but she had told the clerk to have them ready because she would be right back. While Samantha was back in the dressing room changing, Alex examined and paid for earrings then slipped them into her pocket with the necklace. She smiled to herself, knowing that Sam had yet to see how much a part of her life this symbol actually was.

The transaction was quick and by the time Samantha came out and over to her everything had been bought and paid for except the dress. The next stop was the shoe department where they found a nice pair of clear sandal-strap heels and a purse to match. Alex was feeling very contented, having found everything they had come for and then some. Samantha was still trying to lose her feeling of guilt for the price of the outfit they had just purchased. They got back into the car and drove to the hotel. Everything had been accomplished in just under three hours, which gave them a little over two hours to get ready to meet the boys.

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"That was really fun, Alex," Samantha said as they closed the door. "But you spent too much money. I've never spent that much on one dress, a pair of shoes and a purse. Are you sure it's covered in your expense account?"

"I'm positive and you are going to be absolutely stunning tonight. Sonny will be green with envy. No more talk about the cost of the ensemble. Deal?" Alex smiled at her lover.

"Deal." Samantha agreed.

"Now that that's settled . . . Shower or bath?" Alex asked lifting an eyebrow and smiling.

"Well . . . the tub is big enough for the two of us, want to conserve water?" Samantha asked with a gleam in her eyes.

"You do know we have to be dressed by the time they get here, don't you Sam?" Alex answered her.

"Yeah, I'm just suggesting a communal bath - saves time, saves water." She grinned as she carried her packages into the bedroom.

"It might save water, but I know for a fact that it will not save time." Alex stated as she followed Samantha into the other room. "I'll start the water while you hang up your dress so it doesn't wrinkle." She grabbed some of the bath gel that was on the counter in the bathroom and poured the fragrant liquid into the tub. By the time Samantha came into the room Alex was already in the tub covered in bubbles. "Care to join me?" she questioned seductively, lifting her left eyebrow and smiling her crooked smile.

"Most definitely," was the answer she received as the small blonde took off her clothes and climbed in next to her lover. "This feels wonderful," Samantha said as she let the bubbles slip through her fingers.

"This feels even better," Alex began as she put her arms around Samantha's waist and pulled her closer to her.

Samantha was facing Alex and she placed her legs around Alex's waist, sitting on her lap in the warm fragrant water. She put her arms around Alex's neck and smiled. "I can't remember when I have ever been so happy, Alex."

Alex looked into sparkling green eyes and smiled. "Me too, my love." She drew Sam even closer and softly kissed her on the lips then nibbled on her neck and ear. She whispered softly. "Tonight my love, this city belongs to you. Anything you want to do we will. Anything you desire will be yours." Her hands moved slowly from Samantha's waist around to her buttocks as their bodies continued to touch. "I can't seem to get enough of you, Samantha," Alex whispered as she moved her hands around to caress the firm breasts that were covered with bubbles. "I want to make love to you right here," she continued as she placed one arm around Sam's back and brought her to sit on her lap sideways. She used her other hand to stroke the curly mound above her lover's folds and then let her fingers find their way inside to tantalize and tease.

Samantha put both her arms around Alex's neck and buried her face in the broad shoulder. She let out a soft moan and they kissed. "Alex . . . oh . . . Alex," was all that Samantha could say as she tightened her arms around her lover.

"I know, Samantha." Alex assured her as she felt the hardness of her lover and increased her speed and touch. After a few minutes Samantha tightened her legs and Alex could see her nipples harden. It was then that she shifted the position of her fingers and entered her lover, rocking her gently in the water until she reached her peak.

"Alex, every time you make love to me it seems to get more intense. I never knew I could feel so complete. And it keeps getting better. I am so blessed to have found you," Samantha sighed.

"No, Samantha. I'm the one who's blessed. I'm going to make you so happy you will never want to leave me," Alex said as she hugged the small blonde close to her body. "Never."

It hadn't come to their attention before but sitting there they began to notice that the water had begun to chill. The women looked at each other and laughed. It was definitely time to get out of the tub and get dressed before their company made an appearance at the door and they were still sitting in a tub of deflated bubbles.

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It was 7:30 exactly when there was a knock on the door. If for nothing else, Sonny was known for being punctual. Alex was the only one completely dressed so she answered the door. Before leaving the bedroom she gave Samantha a quick kiss on the cheek. "You look absolutely beautiful, just as I said you would, Sam." She complimented the blonde beauty standing before her.

"You look quite gorgeous yourself, Alex." Samantha answered as she lovingly gazed at Alex who stood before her in a dark pin-stripped reefer with pants and vest to match and a white silk blouse. "I'm a little anxious about meeting your friends."

"Don't be, Samantha. They will love you. They're really nice people," Alex affirmed.

A second knock was heard along with, "We know you're in there. Have you decided against company?" It was Sonny's voice and Alex could hear the laughter in it as she quickened her pace to the door.

"Come on in and don't be so snippy," She grinned at her friend as she invited the two of them in. "I told you I would be ready. Samantha is just putting on the finishing touches and she'll be right out."

"I hope she hurries," Sonny started, "I've been trying to picture what this new little cutie of yours might look like. I forgot to even ask you today. We were so busy with business. So, I just had to wonder through my imagination the rest of the afternoon."

"Behave yourself when she comes out, Sonny," Ray chimed in. "We don't want to scare the poor dear off before we even get a chance to know her, now do we?"

"Oh, Ray." Sonny said as he tapped his lover on the chest with one long finger. "You know I wouldn't do anything to upset Alex's new love. I'm just anxious. It's been a long time since we've been able to socialize with Alex without her being a third wheel." He finished and spun around grinning broadly at Alex who stood there shaking her head and smiling. This was going to be one Hell of an evening she thought to herself. Sonny was in rare form tonight.

It was at that point that Samantha decided she could stall no longer. Her stomach felt like she had swallowed a dozen butterflies and they were all inside flitting around. She took a deep breath, put on her best 'glad to meet ya' smile and ventured out of the bedroom and into the living area to meet Alex's old acquaintances.

Alex saw her begin to make her entrance and walked over to give her some support by placing an arm around her waist. "Boys, I would like you to meet Samantha Riley. Samantha, the handsome one over there with the dark hair is Ray. He's the brains of the partnership. The beauty standing beside him with his mouth slightly agape is Sonny. Sonny, close your mouth and say, Hi." Alex concluded.

"You certainly are a looker." Was the first thing out of Sonny's mouth. "Alex, the wait has definitely been worth the outcome," he continued as Alex sent him a 'that's enough, Sonny,' look.

Samantha could feel the blood rushing to her face and ears as Sonny proceeded to walk over to her and take her hand. Alex stepped back knowing full well she had to give Sonny his little inspection or there would be no living with him. "Here, girl, give us a spin and let me take in the entire picture," Sonny said as he spun her gently around to get a better view of both her and the new outfit. "Do you talk, walk and do all the other things dolls do today?" he said smiling at her.

"Sonny, I told you to behave." Ray scowled at his partner. "You're probably scaring the poor girl."

"Ray, I'm only kidding with her. It's my way of saying welcome to the family." Sonny went on as he gave Samantha a peck on the cheek and let go of her hand. "We are going to have a great time tonight, Samantha. I am so very glad to meet you and so is Ray, aren't you Ray? You just put yourself into comfort mode, girl, and get ready to party."

Samantha had realized by now that Sonny was only trying to put her at ease. Dealing with gay guys was a talent not readily forgotten. College memories quickly flooded Samantha's thoughts and she remembered fondly why she had always had such a good time when she was surrounded by her gay male friends. She let her mind slip back into that bantering mode and gave Sonny a flippant retort.

"Why -- Sonny," she started, smiling at the unsuspecting queen, "You'd better believe that I do much more than simply walk and talk. I was specially designed to fulfill Alex's every desire."

"There ya go, Sonny," Ray said, cracking a smile at Samantha's appropriate response, "Looks like you may have just met your match in the quick comeback department."

Alex, not at all expecting Samantha to volley with a statement like that, cleared her throat and tried not to look embarrassed. She was feeling slightly as though she had just been placed under a microscope and was not liking the feeling at all.

"Are we going to stand here all night talking or shall we get going? Isn't anyone hungry?" Alex said to stop the conversation before it continued any further.

"Let's get going." Sonny agreed, "We just might make it there in time for our reservations. Samantha you will love this place," he smiled over at his new friend.

"Wait a minute, I almost forgot something," Alex smiled as she reached into her pocket. She turned to Samantha and had her close her eyes. "This will just take a minute." Reaching over Sam's neck she gently placed the diamond studded necklace on her lover's neck as she bent down and kissed the nape. "I know you will be the balance in my life, Samantha," she whispered into the small blonde's ear. "Go ahead, open your eyes."

Samantha put her hand on the necklace and looked down. She looked back up at Alex with tears in her eyes. "Alex, I don't know what to say. It's the most beautiful necklace I've ever seen." She threw her arms around her lover's neck and kissed her passionately without a hint of reserve. "Thank you, Alex."

Alex just beamed at her and handed her the small box containing the earrings. "I think you might want to wear these in place of the ones you already have on. I think they will go with the necklace."

"Oh, Alex." Samantha began as she opened the velvet box. "Earrings to match." This time a tear managed to fall as she looked back up into Alex's sparkling blue eyes. "I don't know what else to say. I . . ."

"Well, I do." Sonny exclaimed. "I say let's get to the restaurant before they let our table go. And I want a good look at the 'costume stuff' as soon as we get our orders in." He smiled broadly at Alex and winked at Samantha as he put his arm in Ray's and started to walk out of the suite.

Samantha put the earrings on and excused herself for a second while she went and took a quick look in the mirror and refreshed her makeup. Alex shoed the boys out the door with the promise that they would be along directly.

Alex went into the bathroom and put her hands on Samantha's shoulders. "I took one look at that today and knew it had been made to be worn around your neck. I love you, Samantha." Alex turned her around and they tenderly kissed.

"Thank you, Alex. I adore both the earrings and the necklace. I love this symbol. It matches the ones on your stained glass doors in Laguna. Balance -- that's what soul mates do for each other. Each one contributes what the other lacks. I love you, too." Samantha replied.

"Come on. We mustn't keep the boys waiting any longer. Sonny will be beside himself if they give away our table."

Alex put her arm around Samantha's shoulder and the two women started to leave. As they came out of the bathroom, Samantha looked out the window and noticed that once again something wonderful had happened to her at sunset. "Alex, just look at that gloaming. It's as beautiful as the ones in Laguna. You always seem to be doing something special for me at sunset. I suppose that will always be our special time.

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Dinner was exactly what Sonny had promised. They started off with appetizers then went directly into the Mediterranean-style main course, superbly accented by the Far Niente Chardonnay from Napa Valley. Sonny insisted that they at least try one of the "just-desserts" and Samantha made a comment about not being able to still fit into her dress if she did. Of course, Sonny got his way and they ordered two of the choice desserts, which they all shared. It was getting close to 11:00 when Ray decided it was time to bring everything to a close. "I've got a very early morning with those workers on the wall. What do you say we call it a night?"

Sonny, feeling his wine and not wanting to be left out of the planning committee chimed in with, "Where do you girls want to start out on Saturday night?"

This immediately got him an "I'm gonna kill you!" look from Alex which he winced at as he put his fingers up to his mouth and put his head on Ray's shoulder.

Samantha had caught the question, the look and the response. "Am I missing something?" she asked.

"No, Samantha. You're not missing anything," Alex started to explain. "It's just that these two clowns over here decided that it would be better if we stayed the entire weekend and got in some more sightseeing and visiting. Ray needs me to be at the gym on Friday for a few hours as well as tomorrow and I had told him that I promised Friday to you." She glared again at Sonny for having to explain all this in a restaurant instead of in the privacy of the hotel room. "I'm sorry, Sam, it slipped my mind this afternoon when we went shopping and then we were otherwise occupied." She gave Sam a small smirk then continued. "I was going to ask you when we got alone together tonight, but now I don't seem to have that option." She sighed as she finished with her explanation.

"Now that it's all out in the open," Sonny started as he got over his reprimand, "what do you think about staying until Sunday, Samantha? We can have such a good time Saturday night. A little dinner, a little dancing, a little drag show. Then we can all go to a fabulous brunch on Sunday before the two of you take off back to your own little beach town." He grinned over at Alex who was still giving him a cool attitude. "Come on, Sammie, tell Alex you forgive her for not asking sooner and tell me it's a marvelous idea!"

Samantha looked at Sonny and burst out laughing. "How could anyone say no to an invitation like that?" She countered his question. "Alex most definitely is not in trouble and it seems since we are already here that it would be foolish to go back any sooner than Sunday, with such a generous offer." She giggled and Alex gave her a short hug and kiss on the cheek.

"Okay." Ray added. "Now that the extended trip is settled, do you think maybe we could get home so I can function tomorrow at work?"

"You can be such a stick in the mud, Ray." Sonny teased him. "We'll get these girls home tonight, but Saturday we are going to watch the sun rise over the bridge if I have to put caffeine in all of your drinks myself." He laughed as they all got up and headed for the car.

"Ray," Alex began, "I would appreciate it if you would just drop us off at the Wharf. I want to show Samantha around a little while it's not teeming with tourists. We'll either walk home or get a cab."

"Sure, no problem," Ray said. "We'll drop you off at Pier 39."

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The trip to Fisherman's Wharf was a fairly short one and the gals got out of the car after thanking Ray and Sonny for a lovely meal and evening. They decided that they would all meet at the gym in the morning, including Samantha and that they would discuss Saturday's agenda over lunch. Alex and Samantha waved goodbye to the guys and then turned to each other.

"Okay, here it is the famous Fisherman's Wharf." Alex began, "We can just walk around and you can take in all the sights, sounds and smells your little heart desires. This is ideally not the best time to come here but I wanted to get in a least a little tour of something each night. This of course is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the city so it's a must see for the first-timer." Alex smiled at Samantha and put her arm around the smaller woman's shoulders. "A few of the little shops here stay open until midnight. Why don't we find one and get you some comfortable shoes?"

Samantha agreed that having some walking shoes would be a good idea. She put her arm around Alex's waist and gave the taller woman an affectionate squeeze. "This is the perfect ending to a beautiful day, Alex. Look at that carousel over there. I guess it's one of the things that stays open late."

They passed by a few closed shops and a few open ones as they walked toward the carousel. Finally one of the shops looked like it might carry what they were looking for. They went inside and purchased a pair of sandals for Samantha and one of those throwaway cameras.

"Samantha, why don't you get on the carousel and let me take a picture," Alex said as they approached the twirling array of true-to-life animals standing beside those of fable. There were horses, camels, goats and unicorns to name a few, all elaborately decorated. There was even a chariot of Neptune and of course the band organ music.



"No. Why don't we both get on and ask the ticket person to take a picture of both of us," Samantha suggested. "It will be the first picture of us together."

"I'm not one for getting my picture taken," Alex said.

"Oh, Please, Alex. For our scrapbook," Sam pleaded, batting her eyes and smiling.

"How could anyone say no to a face like that," Alex laughed as she purchased the tickets. They walked over and handed the attendant their tickets. "Would you please take a picture of us after we get on?" Alex asked the man.

"Sure, no problem," was his response.

The two women got onto the carousel with Samantha sitting on the unicorn and Alex standing beside her. The attendant took their picture and the ride commenced. By the time the music stopped they had decided it was getting rather late and Alex just wanted to walk over to the Alcatraz Cafe & Grill where Samantha could look out and see The Rock and the Golden Gate Bridge all lit up.

Small talk was the mainstay of their conversation as they walked toward the cafe, filling each other in on likes and dislikes and generally getting to know each other a little better. With the comfort zone between them it seemed as though they had been friends for years, friends who had finally decided to become lovers and not the mere strangers they had been only a few days ago. When they reached the cafe, Samantha was as impressed with the view as Alex knew she would be, but the hour was getting late and they did have an early morning ahead of them. Alex decided a cab would be the most expedient way of getting back to the hotel without completely exhausting themselves and she was very adept at getting cabs.

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Alex looked at her watch as they entered the lobby and relayed to Samantha that it was already one o'clock.

"That was a full day," she said smiling as Samantha leaned against her in the elevator. "Getting a bit tired?"

"Probably more than a bit," Samantha answered. "Do you realize we slept very little last night and are going to sleep very little again tonight? I have plans for you, my sweet," she finished as she leaned back looking up at Alex.

As the doors to the elevator opened onto their floor, Alex placed a kiss on her lover's and murmured, "We'll see."

They opened the door to the suite and Samantha headed for the bedroom to change. She stopped in front of the mirror to admire the necklace and earrings once again as she took the earrings off.

"Alex, these are so beautiful. You've done so much for me in the past couple days and I've done nothing in return."

"Don't be foolish," Alex began from the other room as she walked over to stand in front of Samantha. She took the smaller woman's head in her hands and tilted Sam's face toward her. "I've been wanting you for as long as I can remember. To cherish, to spoil and to love." The dark-haired beauty's eyes misted over as she continued, "I truly believe, especially after finding that jewelry, that you are my Destiny. You have brought joy back into my life, Sam, something I thought I would never truly have again. All the changes I have made in my life have been for the better since I bought the warehouse and you, my lovely, are the piece de resistance. You are the final piece in my life that was so sorely missing. You make me whole and I am sure we will find that we balance each other as our love grows." She bent down and kissed Samantha tenderly and held her close. "We've had quite a busy couple of days, why don't you get ready for bed. I need to check the messages left at the desk and will be right in." Alex smiled tenderly at the small blonde holding her out at arms length, taking in how beautiful she looked even at this late (or early) hour.

"Don't you be long, Alex. You told me earlier that I could have anything that I desired and . . . I desire you." She smiled as Alex let go of her hands and walked back into the living room.

Samantha went into the bathroom, took a quick shower and came back out in an ivory negligee. She went into the top drawer of the nightstand where she had put her purchases from earlier in the day and began to change the mood of the room. She had bought two small vanilla candles and holders from the gift shop downstairs and a card. She had already filled out and signed the card so she placed it on the pillow next to hers. She thought she would wait until Alex went into the bathroom and then light the candles.

Alex, in the meantime, had gone into the kitchen to retrieve her messages. She hoped they were of no importance but thought better about letting them wait until morning. The first was from the security people who were in charge of the silent alarm system she had installed. The man was saying that there had been a break-in. They had gotten to the warehouse as soon as the alarm was tripped but that the car in the garage had been vandalized and he wanted to know what she wanted him to do about it besides call the police, which he had already done. She was glad Samantha was in the other room and didn't hear the statement. She would have to call first thing in the morning, find out the details and try to get the car fixed before they got back on Sunday. She decided not to mention it to Sam, no sense marring her trip.

The second was from the supervisor in charge of the climbing wall and he was calling to tell her that everything she had wanted done had been completed and that the wall was definitely safe now.

The last message was just a quick "Hi" from Sonny who just had to tell her that he thought Samantha was just what she needed in her life and that he was glad they would get a chance to know her better. *He's so Nellie when he's drinking.* She thought to herself. *Hell, he's Nellie when he isn't. I think that's why he's one of my favorite people. He's always just himself.*

She threw off the unsettling feeling about the break-in and vowed to make sure her security system was updated when she got home. The garage was supposed to have been monitored just like the rest of the warehouse. She couldn't understand how someone could have gotten in before the security people had it handled.

She didn't bother to make any notes because she didn't want Samantha to see them. She decided to take care of everything in the morning and then forget about it until they got home. Nothing was going to put a damper on the rest of this mini-vacation with Sam. Turning off the kitchen and living room lights, she made her way back into the bedroom.

"I'll just be a bit, Sam," she told her lover, "I'm going to take a quick shower."

Samantha waited until Alex closed the door then she lit the two candles and placed one on each of the nightstands beside the bed. The room took on a soft glow and Samantha was pleased with the effect. She laid down on the bed to wait for Alex to come back in.

Alex couldn't have been more than 10 minutes in the bathroom. When she opened the door, the room was filled with the fragrance of vanilla and the soft light from the candles flickered across Samantha's face. Alex walked over to the bed and was just about to say something to Sam when she realized that the woman on the bed was sound asleep. She had set such a beautiful scene but was too exhausted to play it through to the end. Alex walked over to the other side of the bed, saw the card on the pillow and opened it.

The drawing on the card was of a small lake beside which stood a gazebo surrounded by wildflowers. The inside had been blank but now held a personalized poem in small neat printing.

To Alex:

The pool of life reflects it all, what was before, what is to be  
The ripples are the times of strife. The calmness, life's serenity.  
And as you gaze - one person there - remains from mid-life til your endp  
A lover in the truest sense, but more than lover, she's your friend  
She'll stand beside you - wait and see  
The two of you shall have tomorrow  
She'll ride the crest of all your waves  
And if they break, she'll share your sorrow  
Reflected in the pool's design  
Your image, intertwined with mine.

With Love, Samantha

With eyes filled with tears of joy, Alex looked over at her sleeping beauty. She quietly extinguished each of the candles then pulled down the covers and crawled into bed next to Samantha. As she lay down, Samantha turned in her sleep and ended up in the position she seemed to favor most with her head in the crook of Alex's shoulder and her arm around Alex's

waist. Alex gently kissed her on the forehead and whispered, "Goodnight, my Destiny. Perhaps tomorrow you will fulfill your desire but for tonight, may your dreams be sweet."

Continued in Part 7.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

WomynBard@aol.com

## Part 7

### Chapter 7

Not surprisingly, Alex was the first to awaken in the morning. She slipped quietly out of bed so as not to wake Sam and went out into the living room.

*First things first*, she thought to herself, *call the damn 24-hour security company in Laguna*. She got the number out of her daytimer and dialed. A sweet voice answered and asked to whom she wished to speak.

"This is Alexis Dorian. I would like to speak to someone who knows about the vandalism done in my garage last night. The name of my company is Alternative Paradise and there really isn't an address to speak of yet."

Within seconds a very apologetic voice came on the line. "Ms. Dorian, first let me tell you how sorry I am that . . ."

The voice was curtly interrupted by Alex, "I don't want to hear how sorry. I want to know how it happened and why."

"Ms. Dorian, it seems that when they hooked up your garage, the side door was not included because your construction people were still working in the area at the same time my people were trying to finish up. Therefore, we didn't get the signal until the perpetrator was already inside the garage. After that the police were there within minutes." The unlucky representative heaved a sigh and waited for Alex's wrath to continue.

"So, because your people were in such a hurry they couldn't wait around to complete the job properly, I'm a victim. Is that the way you see it?" Alex's voice seemed to thunder across the telephone line.

"I guess it could be stated that way, Ms. Dorian," the contrite rep admitted.

"Now -- I want you to tell me exactly what the damages are and what your company is going to do to fix them." The authority in Alex's voice gave the company man no recourse.

"The damages . . . let me look here . . . yes . . . the damages seem to have been of a . . . personal nature. The vandal deeply etched the word -- ah, excuse my language, Ms. Dorian but this is what the paper says -- 'bitch' on both sides of the car and on the hood. The person didn't stay long enough to do any other harm."

The first person to come to Alex's mind was Jake, the employee she had fired the other day. She hadn't thought he would have been so brazen but . . . She let that thought drop and got back to her conversation.

"So, was the inside set up for the camera at least?" Alex demanded to know.

"Actually it was," the rep started his answer, "but the vandal knew enough to think that there might be a camera and kept a very low profile. The person was also disguised with a mask. I suppose that is why just the small amount of damage was done. I don't think robbery was the motive. And if they thought the place was secure, I don't know why anyone would even go ahead and chance it."

"Okay, okay," Alex hurried the man along. "Now, I'm going to tell you what I expect from your company." Alex continued in a firm voice. "First, be assured that the damage is not superficial and is not a small amount. I want you to go and get the car and take it to the best paint shop in the area. I want the color matched perfectly and I want it finished and back in my garage by the

time I get home on Sunday afternoon, looking as though not a thing had gone awry. Your company is very lucky we have decided to stay in San Francisco for a few more days. And even luckier still that I am going to give you people a second chance and continue using your company for my security."

"But, Ms. Dorian," the rep began dismayed, "I can't authorize something that monumental. I don't have that kind of authority," he whined at her.

"Then you sure as Hell had better get someone on the phone this minute who can and does!" Alex demanded as forcefully as she could without raising her voice and waking Sam.

Within minutes another voice came on the line that was much more accommodating. "Hello, Ms. Dorian. My name is Gerald Shaw and I am going to handle your request."

"Good, Gerald," Alex approved, "were you informed how I want this handled?"

"Yes, I was. John just filled me in. I will need to tape record the rest of this conversation because we are going to have to have the car towed from the garage and I need your permission to do that. I want to make sure we are legally protected," he stipulated.

"Okay, Gerald." She gave the man just a second or two and began, "Are you ready?"

"Yes, Ms. Dorian. We are now recording," came the reply from the unlucky rep.

"You most certainly have my permission to record this conversation and to have someone tow the Volkswagen to and from the paint shop. You already have keys to the garage so that should be no problem, and if there is any damage to the side door, have that fixed as well," Alex told the new representative. "I expect all areas of the building to be fully covered by the time I get back."

"Consider it all done, Ms. Dorian." Then Gerald went on to say, "I assure you that it will all be finished and the car will be back in a secured garage by Sunday afternoon. Would you like me to telephone you on Monday?"

"No. I will phone you Monday morning, Gerald," Alex told the man who had the misfortune of having to deal with a very unhappy Alex. "I believe we have said all that needs to be said at this point. Until Monday."

"Goodbye, Ms. Dorian. I hope the rest of your vacation is pleasant." With the last statement both he and Alex hung up the phone.

Alex was glad that was taken care of for the time being and thankful that Samantha had not come out of the bedroom during the entire conversation. She next phoned the front desk and explained to them that their trip had been extended and they wanted to stay until Sunday morning. The suite had not as yet been booked the front desk informed her so they could continue staying in the same rooms.

Having the two most pressing problems out of the way she proceeded into the kitchen to brew some tea. She would call the warehouse from the gym sometime this morning and speak to the supervisor personally. There were a few pressing matters she needed taken care of before they arrived home. She also wanted one of the supervisors to stay on and take notes while the security people handled the situation that they had created. She wanted to know the attitude that was taken as they were repairing their mistake. If the attitude was good, a second chance was definitely in order, if not she would find a new company to protect her investments.

Now it was time to order some breakfast and wake Samantha up. They had another busy day planned. She called down to room service and ordered, then went back into the bedroom to wake Samantha .

"Okay, Sleeping Beauty," Alex said as she gently bent over and kissed the blonde who was still sleeping peacefully on the bed. "I hate to have to wake you, but it's time to rise and shine."

"I'll rise, but I refuse to shine," came the first mumble from the small woman in the bed. Then she stretched and yawned and stretched again. She pulled the pillow she wasn't sleeping on over her head and held it there.

"No you don't," Alex told her. "It's time to get up and get going. We have places to go and people to see." She laughed as she pulled the pillow from the sleepy blonde's hands.

Samantha opened her eyes and focused intently on the individual standing beside the bed, holding onto the pillow she had just taken from her.

"On second thought, come here you!" Samantha said to Alex as she pulled her back down onto the bed with her. She rolled over on top of the taller woman and placed a kiss on her cheek. "That will have to keep you until I go brush my teeth. I hate morning mouth," she said as she hopped off the bed and into the bathroom, giggling.

From the bathroom Alex could barely hear a word she was saying. "I'm so . . . and it's lovely . . . today is going . . . oh, Alex . . ."

Alex could take it no more and marched to the bathroom door. "If you are going to try talking to me, at least take the brush out of your mouth." She smiled at the picture of sunshine before her where a sleepy head had been just minutes ago. "Samantha, that poem you wrote last night. It's absolutely beautiful. It reminds me of something my mother would write. You and she will get along wonderfully when you finally get to meet each other. She's a writer, too."

"Really? I'm glad we'll have something in common, aside from loving you." The small blonde beamed over at the tall, dark figure standing in the doorway. "I'm so happy to be here with you, Alex. I feel that we will be to each other what I said in the poem. I want to be someone you can count on through the good and the bad. I feel so . . . I don't know . . . lucky." She finished brushing her teeth and then proceeded to give her lover a proper morning kiss.

"Mmmm. Now that's more what I had in mind," she said leaning back and looking up into sparkling sapphire eyes. "By the Gods, I'm starving. What did you have in mind for breakfast?"

As though on cue, there was a slight knock on the door and a voice announcing that room service was here.

"Room service. You ordered from room service? How chic." Samantha beamed as Alex went to answer the door.

The young man brought the rolling table in and placed it next to the table in the living area. Alex thanked him, gave him a tip and walked with him to the door. She then turned to Samantha who was coming out of the bedroom.

"Here you are, my lovely," Alex exclaimed as she lifted first one silver lid and then another. "Cheese omelets, toast and pancakes complete with butter and syrup. Over here we have a large carafe of orange juice." Alex continued moving her hand in a flowing manner to display the entire meal. "Do you think this will fill that empty leg of yours until lunch?"

"Most definitely," Samantha answered as she took the chair that Alex offered and sat down in front of the breakfast feast. "What, no bacon?" she grinned at her lover.

"Even a hotel chain as environmentally conscious as this one has not yet decided that substitute proteins are the way of the future," Alex laughed as she slid Samantha's chair into the table.

"I'm only kidding, Alex. This is great!"

The next few hours were spent eating their breakfast in front of the window overlooking the bay, discussing how they would go about the business portion of the day and getting ready to go to the gym for their meeting with Ray and Sonny. On the way to the gym they further discussed how Samantha could help with the business. Alex asked her if she knew shorthand and Samantha told her that she had taken it in high school and had used it through college to help her take good notes. It had come in quite handy and yes, she would be happy to put it to use again. She would take notes while they talked of all that needed to be done and then would type them out while Alex went with Ray to overlook the final construction of the wall. Samantha suggested making a file folder on Sonny's computer and then having a backup disk just in case. That way even when Alex wasn't there, the guys would have something to refresh their memories as to what needed to be kept up and ordered, for the new item. She then went off on a tangent, telling Alex about the time she had a disk corrupt on her after she had finished an entire day's work on it and she had not saved the file to her hard drive. She had to type everything over again.

Alex listened quietly, as seemed to be her way, and when Sam wound the story down they went back to talking about the businesses at hand. They finished the conversation by discussing where Samantha wanted to have lunch. The choice was made a little more difficult because they were both completely sated and any discussion of food at this point was not at all appetizing. After giving Sam a list of options, Chinatown was the decided destination.



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Sonny was waiting for them in his office and he buzzed Ray to come and join them. He was his usual bouncy self, babbling on about all the fun they were all going to have on Saturday and how much he was looking forward to it. He kept on and on, until Ray brought him down to earth and down to business. The four of them sat in Sonny's office and discussed all the aspects of the wall until Ray had no more feelings of insecurity about the decision he had made to incorporate the new purchase. Then Ray and Alex went upstairs to see how the construction was coming along. Samantha went to the computer to put everything on disk, in a file and on paper. Sonny went about the usual daily business of the gym and everyone was busy until Samantha's stomach started making hunger noises around 12:30. She left the office in search of a familiar face and found Sonny over at the receptionist's desk where she quickly joined him.

"How much longer do you think they will be today, Sonny?" she asked. "My stomach's beginning to think my throat's been cut. I really need to get something to eat and if we aren't going to be able to do lunch, then I need to find a snack machine," she added and smiled at her new friend.

"Hold on, Sweetness," I'll go on up and make those two workaholics stop for the day. They can continue with this tomorrow. We told you two we would only need the mornings and I do believe the morning is officially over." He double clicked his fingers in a down and up motion and flitted off to find the missing duo, leaving Samantha smiling at the receptionist and shaking her head.

The trio came into sight in less than five minutes and everyone agreed that Chinatown would be a fun place to have lunch. They decided to take a taxi to the entrance of Chinatown where there was a large green dragon covered gateway -- a gift from the Republic of China. The restaurant Sonny had chosen was close to the entrance so walking before lunch was kept to a minimum. Sightseeing would commence after lunch. The motif of the restaurant was straight out of a Charlie Chan movie, hues of red and red and more red. Chinese symbols and little pagodas everywhere as well as pictures of China on the walls. The restaurant was serving an enormous buffet containing many varieties of fish, chicken, beef, pork and of course vegetable dishes. The ladies stuck with the vegetable and fish items, but the guys had a sampling of everything. Samantha got her first taste of sake and decided that it was different but definitely not her drink of choice. Then Sonny ordered her a flavored sake, getting a look of disapproval from Alex.

"What?" he challenged his friend. "She's old enough to drink."

"Yes, but I want her to enjoy walking around Chinatown. I don't want to have to pack her into a cab and take her home before the day even begins." Alex retorted.

"Okay, okay." Sonny turned to Samantha, "Only one, just to taste. Don't want to get mom's feathers rustled." He laughed and toasted his newly found friend.

They topped the meal off with dim-sum tea pastries, some of those little dumplings with the red stuff inside and of course fortune cookies.

"In a few minutes we'll walk by the Golden Gate Cookie Company and you can actually watch as these little babies are being hand-folded." Sonny informed Samantha as he held up his fortune cookie. "What does yours say, Sam?"

"Let's see," she answered as she broke the cookie in two and took out the white sheet of paper with the ever anticipated saying. "*Great love and fortune awaits the honest heart,*" she read off the paper. "Aren't I the lucky one today? What does yours say, Sonny?"

"Mine says, *Happiness is within your grasp, don't let it pass you by.* Well, I'm all for that!" Sonny smiled over at Ray. "You're next."

Ray shrugged his shoulders in a 'do I really have to do this?' fashion. He got a poke in the ribs from Alex, so he opened up his cookie. "*Look at the clouds as holders of the rainbow not deliverers of rain.* "

"Oh, that was made just for you, darling." Sonny laughed clapping his hands together before turning to Alex. "Okay, girl. Your turn."

Alex gave her friend a small grin as she opened the last cookie on the tray, "*Great Things Come in Small Packages,*" she read from the paper. "It's not very original but . . ." she looked over at Samantha smiling back at her, "I would have to agree with the sentiment. Now . . . have we all had our fill of Chinese food and fortunes?"

"I don't think I could eat another bite, at least not for a couple hours. Then you know I will be starving again!" Samantha answered smiling at Alex.

"I'm ready," Sonny chimed in as he handed the bill to Ray.

"Let me get this one, Sonny," Alex contested as she reached for the tab.

"No way." Ray interjected. "This little excursion and the one Saturday night is on us. It's a simple business expense. We brought you up here and we're going to take care of you while you're in our city. No arguing, no discussing, it's final."

"Okay. When you put it that way, what else can I say? Thanks, lunch was great." Alex surrendered graciously.

"Ditto from me," Samantha chimed in.

"Well, then it's time to sightsee," Sonny announced.

They walked out of the restaurant and down the street. Soon they were standing in front of the Golden Gate Cookie Company, watching in awe as the employees twisted and turned the small pieces of dough into the familiar looking cookies after placing a fortune inside each one.

Samantha remarked to the rest of the little group how she couldn't get over all the pagodas everywhere she turned, even on the telephone booths. They took pictures to remind them of new friends and interesting places and it was soon time for the boys to get back to the gym.

"I just hate leaving when I'm having so much fun," Sonny began as he turned to Ray with a pleading look.

"No, Sonny. You know we already discussed this little adventure today and decided that we would only have lunch with the girls and then leave them on their own," was the answer he received from his lover, followed by a stern, no nonsense look.

"Party pooper," was the only come back Sonny could think of saying. "I have to go with the grouch now, so you two, little sweethearts, have a marvelous afternoon and we will see you bright eyed and bushy tailed -- now that's a thought! -- in the morning. Kisses all around." He finished his goodbye with a hug and kiss to each of the women and whispered about Saturday in Samantha's ear. He kept waving at them until Ray finally flagged down a cab and pulled him into it.

"He's a real kook, Alex!" Samantha said laughing as she watched Ray settling his lover down in the cab. "I wouldn't have wanted to miss meeting those two for anything. I know Saturday is going to be a blast. Sonny is so excited about going to a drag show again. He said Ray hasn't taken him to one in years." She looked at her watch and then back at Alex. "So what do we do next?"

"Let's just walk toward Portsmouth Square, there's a statue of the Goddess of Democracy there. A little bit of trivia -- it's also the place where the first flag of the United States was raised here in San Francisco. On the way we can stop at any of the little shops you might want to look in and then head back to the hotel. Anything in particular you want to see?" Alex asked.

"I don't think so, walking and window shopping sounds great," was Samantha's response. "You really know a lot about this city. Guess you come here often?"

"I've spent a lot of time up here in the past eight years with Sonny and Ray as clients. A lot of time was spent here when the gym was first getting started. If I wasn't here on business we were just hanging out together, they're probably the best friends I have." Alex answered. "Also, my folks and I used to vacation here occasionally. Mom graduated from Berkeley so she loves the area and knows a lot about it. That's where I get my trivia. Mom's big on trivia."

Samantha managed to purchase some souvenirs as she walked, talked and gawked. She purchased a little Buddha necklace for her sister and an oriental vase for her mom. She found a tie-tac for her dad in one of the little shops where the owner did not speak any English and was surprised to find out that Alex spoke Mandarin Chinese.

"I studied it after college for a couple years. It's the International Trade language after all," was Alex's answer to Samantha's astonished look. "I felt it wouldn't hurt to know a little."

Alex tried to talk Samantha into getting something for herself, but Sam kept insisting there was nothing she wanted, until they happened into a little shop off the main street in one of the little alleys. There was a necklace with the Chinese symbol for luck on it and earrings to match. On top of the symbol was a carved unicorn representing peace and prosperity.

"Alex, look at this." Samantha said as she held the necklace up and studied it. "The clerk just told me that it's lavender jade. Isn't it beautiful?" Samantha asked as she showed her find to Alex.

"Yes, it's quite nice." Alex responded and then told the clerk they would like to purchase the set.

When Samantha heard the price of the jewelry, her face went slack and she started to put it back on the counter for the woman to put away.

"What do you think you're doing?" Alex asked, taking the set back off the counter and beginning to place the necklace around Samantha's neck. "Everyone needs a little luck from Chinatown, now don't they," she continued as she elicited a response from the saleswoman.

"No. Alex. Not again. You've already spent too much money on me these last couple days and I can't afford this on my salary." Samantha protested stepping back away from Alex and the necklace.

"Wait just a minute. Do you know the legend of jade?" Alex asked her.

The quiet woman behind the counter spoke up, "This lavender jade is very rare and jade has a way of getting into the possession of the person who should have it. The Chinese believe that the secret virtue of jade is absorbed by the wearer into the body." The slight woman continued, "It is the stone of nobility and fortune and contains the essence of love. It was also used in ancient times to drive off evil beasts and it was an amulet that warriors wore."

"See there, how can you pass up such a precious gem. This little shop and the jade itself must have wanted you to find it. The legend goes on," Alex continued, "it is said that the person who gives jade as a gift gives a piece of herself. So you see, Samantha, you must take it as a gift." Alex would not take no for an answer, as if she ever did.

"But Alex . . ." Samantha tried once more.

"I told you the City and anything you desired would be yours, now didn't I? I know you desire this . . . so consider it yours. Anyway, I haven't spent any out-of-pocket money yet so . . . No more discussion." Alex turned to the saleswoman and paid for the jewelry.

"But, Alex." Sam still tried to deter her, "I have the other necklace, also."

"Now you have a trade off, don't you? This is more for everyday wear and the other can be for special occasions." she smiled as she gave Samantha a soft kiss on the cheek, opened the box and took out the necklace. She placed it around the slender neck and handed Sam the earrings to put on as well.

"Thank you, Alex," was all Samantha could think of to say as she put the earrings on.

Walking out of the shop Alex leaned over and whispered in Samantha's ear. "Seeing you smile brightens my day. I like giving to you Samantha. Normally, I would have thought the green jade to be better suited to you, it would have brought out the green in your eyes, but I love the look of the lavender." She kissed the smaller woman on the ear as they stepped back into the sunshine.

"So, have you had enough sightseeing for one day?" Alex asked her as they continued walking down the street. She was hoping she would get an affirmative answer from the small blonde. She had enough Chinatown to last a year.

"Yes." Samantha replied, "Especially after that last purchase." She looked up at Alex and mouthed another 'thank you.'

"Good. I thought maybe we could go back to the hotel, go for a swim or just relax the rest of the evening."

"Sounds good to me. My feet are beginning to object to all this walking. Are we going to walk home?" Sam almost whined.

"No." Alex said with a laugh in her voice. "I'll hail us a cab. We've done enough walking around this city for today." She walked over to the curb and put out her arm to hail the next yellow taxi she spotted.

It wasn't long before they were sitting in the rear seat of the cab on their way back to the hotel. It had been quite a busy day up until now and both the ladies were looking forward to a quiet evening alone. Samantha promised herself that tonight she would not fall asleep and she would make love to Alex. She was a little afraid of not being able to come up to the standards of love making that Alex might have been used to before her. She had never made love to a woman, but if desire had anything to do with performance, she would be giving a standing ovation.

"Are you getting hungry at all," Samantha asked Alex in the elevator on the way up to the rooms.

"I could eat something. Want to order in?" Alex asked.

"Order in . . . yeah . . . that sounds great. Then we could get comfortable and settle in for the evening. Could we just forget the swim for now? I think my body is telling me to just rest for a while. We must have walked miles this afternoon." Samantha said, kicking off her shoes as she walked through the door into the suite.

She went over to the refrigerator and got out a bottle of water and then picked up the room service menu.

Alex checked the messages and was happy to hear that the only message was from Sonny telling her they had a great lunch and not to forget to be at the gym in the morning.

"I really had a good time today, Alex." Samantha said as she walked over to her lover and put her arms around her. Every day we've been together is special. I love getting to know you better. I know it's all new to us right now, but it feels so right. The only problem is that you're beginning to spoil me." She fingered the new piece of jewelry resting elegantly on her chest. "If you don't stop it soon you may create a monster." She smiled up at the taller woman and Alex bent down and placed a soft passionate kiss on the waiting lips.

"I know you will never be a monster, and I enjoy spoiling you a little. Its been a long time since I've had the desire to spoil another person and even when I did before it never felt as right as spoiling you does." Alex gave a look that was slightly difficult to read. There was a seriousness on her face that reminded Samantha of the first time she had seen the dark-haired beauty. She secretly wished that someday that look would be vanished from the beautiful face of her lover forever and that she would be the reason it would never appear again. *Dumb romantic*, she thought to herself.

"If spoiling me makes you happy, who am I to put a kink in your joy." Samantha giggled as she hugged Alex and put her head on the taller woman's chest. She glanced out the window and sighed at the beauty of everything that was happening in her life. She felt totally at home with Alex's arms draped around her.

By the time dinner arrived Samantha was famished. She devoured her food with a passion. Alex couldn't believe that such a small person could put so much food away at one sitting.

"You're gonna bust if you don't slow down," Alex chided her smaller companion.

"It's just that walking makes me hungry and this is so good." Samantha said as she finally sat back from the table and looked at Alex. "What's under that last lid?"

"It's dessert, but you can't have it until later. Let that meal get down a little first." She poured the two of them another glass of wine and ushered Samantha over to the sofa where they could watch the sun turn the Golden Gate Bridge the color it was famous for.

"That's beautiful." Samantha began as she stared out the window across the bay. "The world is such a small place today. In hours you can be anywhere in the entire United States from the west coast to the east coast. One minute you're looking at the Pacific Ocean, and a few hours later you could be looking at the Atlantic Ocean." She looked up at Alex and smiled. "But you know what?"

"No what?" Alex bit at the bait.

"Being here with you is the only place I ever want to be. Not only here . . . you know what I mean . . . being with you - no matter where here is. I know . . . I'm babbling again . . . it's just that I'm so happy, Alex and I feel stupid continuing to say it over and over again." Samantha began to blush at her loss of words.

"Don't worry, honey. I know what you're trying to say. I feel the same way." Alex admitted, letting Samantha off the hook. She then changed the subject. "I feel gritty from being outside in the city all day. I'm going to go shower now, unless you would rather take a bath with me?" Alex offered.

"A bath would be nice." Samantha nodded with an affirmative shake of her head and a sly smile. "Let me go first though, I'll just be a minute. Why don't you refresh our wine glasses and bring them in with you?"

Samantha got up and walked into the bedroom where she quickly lit the candles and took one of them into the bathroom with her. She started filling the Jacuzzi and turned off the light. The candle flickered and there was plenty of illumination to bathe by.

Alex picked up the dessert container and placed it in the refrigerator. She refilled their glasses and walked into the bedroom. The candle flickering on the nightstand brought a smile to her face. She found herself getting anxious about what she knew her lover had planned. *So, Samantha, this evening you will fulfill your desire. To be honest with you, I can't wait until you do.* She found a light jazz station on the bedside radio and turned it up loud enough to be heard in the bathroom then walked over to join the blonde in the Jacuzzi.

Samantha had put bubble bath in the tub and had already gotten in when Alex stepped into the bathroom.

"Well now, aren't we Miss Quick and Bubbly," Alex smiled.

"Uh, huh," was the reply from the half-submerged beauty as she batted her eyes and smiled sheepishly. "Candy, little girl?"

"Oh, Samantha. Where'd you drudge that line up?" Alex laughed as she undressed and began to step into the Jacuzzi.

"What's that?" Samantha asked, pointing to the area just below the bikini line on the lower right side of Alex's abdomen. "Come here, I never noticed that before."

"I know you haven't it's always been either covered or there hasn't been enough light to see it. This is why buying that first necklace for you was so important to me." Alex tried to explain.

"Why, it's a yin/yang tattoo. Why didn't you tell me you had a tattoo?" Samantha asked as she began to examine the small black and skin tone design.

"I didn't see any reason to before," came the quiet reply. "Let me fill you in," Alex began as she sat down in the warm bath. "About a year ago I had just finished reading a book on Feng Shui, you know, the ancient Chinese system of creating harmonious surroundings. I had been into martial arts for years but had never really taken all of the philosophy seriously. After reading the book I knew that if I wanted to change my life for the better I needed to do some sincere self-reconstructing along with being more aware of my physical environment. That's when I designed

the doors for the building. But the doors are another story, Sam, and I promise you we will go over all the symbols after we get home, and I will explain why I chose the ones I did. For now the only thing that is important is that I decided to get this tattoo to remind myself that balance needed to be utmost in my life. It was my way of telling myself to stop and smell the roses. After I got it and started doing affirmations and changing little things around me, everything started to fall into place. To top it all off, I met you. Just another sign to me that I was finally doing things right." Alex smiled and took Samantha's face in her hands.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me Samantha. I know that already. There's your smile to my grimace, your exuberance to my anxiety, your innocence to my cynicism. We truly seem to be the balance for each other. Even more than that you are beginning to make me see that I don't have to be the pessimist any longer. You are helping me find the self I lost somewhere along the way."

"Now, my dear Samantha, you've made me rant on for longer than I usually care to." She pulled Samantha closer and kissed her tenderly. The kiss became more passionate as Alex's arms found their resting place around Samantha's contoured waist.

Samantha was the first to break off the kiss. "No funny stuff in the tub, tonight, Alex. I've got other plans for you. I will not be put off, side tracked or fall asleep this time," Samantha insisted as she put on her determined look and pushed slightly away from Alex. "Here let me wash your back and you just keep your hands in front of you. Not there!" she laughed and moved Alex's hands from her thighs. "There, place them on your own thighs. Now behave yourself."

"You're no fun," was the response Alex gave as she grinned at the small blonde and splashed water at her.

Samantha answered the splash with one of her own and before they knew it there was water all over the floor.

"I think it's time we got out of the tub before we have maintenance coming up complaining that there's water dripping into the rooms below us," Alex finally said as she stood up and grabbed their towels. She wrapped hers around her body then turned and offered to dry Sam off.

It was good to feel loved, not possessed, but loved in the pure, selfless way that Samantha seemed to love her. She smiled as she rubbed the towel over the pale skin of her lover's back and Alex's body responded to her thoughts. She leaned over and kissed Samantha on her shoulders and neck then wrapped the towel around her and held the smaller woman to her. "I love you," she whispered.

Samantha turned around to face the dark-haired charmer who had stolen her heart so easily. "I love you, too. Come on, let's go to bed."

Samantha picked up the candle from its place on the tub and brought it into the bedroom with her, placing it on the other nightstand, while Alex lowered the music to a soft hum. They pulled down the covers and Alex was the first into the bed.



"Alex, roll over on your stomach. Let me give you a massage. It'll feel good after all the walking around we did today."

"Just your touching me feels good. I don't care what you call it." The taller woman smiled and rolled over.

Samantha looked at the tall beauty lying on the bed and her heart started to pound faster. She decided that the best way to begin would be to straddle Alex and start with her shoulders. She had brought a bottle of lotion with her from the bathroom. She put some in the palm of her hand to warm the creamy, white liquid. Starting at the nape of Alex's neck she gently massaged the woman under her. Slowly she let her hands explore every inch of Alex's neck and back traveling slowly down to her waist, teasingly touching Alex's breasts on either side as she ran her fingers up and down the long, slender back. She leaned over, her nipples touching Alex's back and she heard a soft moan come from her lover. "I love touching you, my love," she whispered. "Touching you makes me get all tingling inside." She moved her body off to the side and proceeded to run her fingers further down Alex's back, gently squeezing her buttocks on the way to the muscular thighs. Coming back up from the thighs her hand ventured between her lover's legs and the muscles all over Alex's body tensed.

"Relax, my love. This is supposed to loosen you up, not make you more tense." Again, Samantha leaned over and kissed the soft back, showering butterfly kisses over the entire area and watching as the love bumps formed on her lover's skin.

"Now, Alex - turn over," she softly commanded.

Samantha's fingers drew little circles around the area of the small tattoo then larger circles that encompassed most of the abdomen. Listening to the music from the radio she began to softly sing with the song that had just come on. "I want somebody to share all the rest of my life. She'll know my inner most thoughts and my intimate secrets . . ." she hummed along with the music as she continued stroking the body next to her, "she will be there for me, as I will for her . . ." She leaned over and spoke into Alex's ear, "Did you ever listen to a song and just know that it was written about you?"

"No, but I have had a few that struck pretty close to home at times," Alex said looking up into green eyes that were slightly clouded over. "Does that song make you sad?" she asked concerned.

"No, just the opposite. I think it's beautiful. It describes the way I feel about you and me." Sam stared into Alex's face and then kissed her passionately. "I want to make you happier than anyone else ever has," she told Alex as she positioned her body on top of the taller woman's.

Samantha had never made love to a woman before but everything was coming as naturally as if she had. She had never been the aggressor and now she was finding herself wanting to crawl inside this woman beneath her and become one with her. She kissed Alex on the lips, then the cheeks and forehead. She kissed the long neck, down to the collarbone and continued to the beginning of Alex's chest. Finally, she put her mouth around one of the firm nipples that had

long since hardened at her touch. She had never done anything as sensual as this before. Her body tingled all over as she suckled her lover's firm breasts, first one and then the other. She wondered why she hadn't known earlier that she was meant to love a woman. She knew in her heart that the way she was now feeling was the way people were suppose to feel when they made love to someone or had someone make love to them. Perhaps she never knew all this before because she was not meant to love just anyone else. She knew from somewhere deep down inside, that this one particular woman out of all the people in the world had been chosen somewhere in time to be the other half of her soul. No one would ever be able to convince her of anything different. Her goal now was to make sure that Alex felt the same way about her.

Samantha sighed softly, releasing the breast to move further down her lover's body. She knew Alex was aware that she had no experience in making love with a woman. Her only hope was that she felt as good to Alex as touching Alex felt to her. She reached the soft, dark, curly mound below the abdomen and inhaled a sweet fragrance. As she parted the folds beneath the mound with her fingers she again lower her body further, placing herself between the long, muscular thighs as she began to let her tongue explore a region that was at once totally new to her and yet strangely familiar. "Alex, you taste wonderful," she mumbled as she filled herself with the sweetness that was Alex and then glanced up to see a look of rapture on her lover's face.

She knew how Alex had made her feel each time she had made love to her and Samantha emulated the actions of the more experienced woman. When she felt Alex had reached a moment of intensity, she lifted her head and placed two fingers inside her lover, lifting her own body up and bringing herself so she could watch the expressions on Alex's face. There were so many new feelings and she wanted to savor each and every one of them.

As Samantha studied Alex she realized that her body, was also reacting to the drama being played out, yet another new experience for her. Taking her cue from the movement of her lover she began to increase her speed and thrust as she found herself becoming more and more excited, her own breathe quickening and her heart pounding faster as the speed increased and Alex became more excited.

"More," Alex moaned. "Samantha, more . . . please."

"I'm sorry Alex . . . I don't understand . . . what do you mean more?" Samantha questioned, realizing that she wasn't doing something right but not having any idea what. She mentally scolded herself for being such a novice. She so wanted to please Alex and make her feel the way she had felt when Alex made love to her. *You're an idiot, Sam. You don't even know what she wants*, was the reaction she received from her own thoughts.

Alex placed a hand on top of Samantha's and said, "Another finger, honey, I need more of you, Samantha."

Sam smiled. "I can certainly accommodate that," she said as she inserted yet another finger into the soft area between her lover's folds.

Alex let out a soft, "Yes, Samantha . . . oh . . . yes. Keep doing exactly what you're doing, my love. You feel wonderful."

Samantha held Alex close trying to anticipate the next move to bring her lover to satisfaction. Her own emotions ebbed and flowed as the two of them seemed to meld. "Alex, I love you," Samantha would intersperse between moans of passion. Alex would echo the statement back to her. The intensity of the act of love grew with Samantha matching Alex's every move and they rocked back and forth with a slow, steady rhythm. Samantha could feel Alex's muscles tighten around her fingers allowing a warm liquid to run out between the taller woman's thighs. She could also feel a pulsating deep within the well where her fingers now were still. *Now I know what it feels like to be on the other end of an orgasm*, Samantha thought, *almost as good as on the receiving end*. Alex grabbed Samantha's hand and held it firmly in place on a final inward thrust.

They were both still for what seemed like minutes, then Samantha kissed Alex on the cheek and started to remove her hand.

"If you know what's good for you, you won't move that hand again until I say so," Alex said smiling widely. Samantha noticed a small tear trickle down the side of her lover's face.

"Alex," she began, "Are you . . ."

"Tears of utter joy and satisfaction, my love. Don't worry." Alex assured her.

The pulsating continued for a few more minutes as Alex wrapped her arms around the smaller woman and brought her close. "I love you, Samantha. You made me feel fantastic." She kissed Sam and then told her she could remove her hand if she wanted.

Samantha did so and lay back on the pillow. Alex turned onto her right side and looked into her lover's eyes. "That was a pretty marvelous first go at love making, my destiny." Alex started, "If I didn't know better I would have thought you'd been in this situation before."

"Yeah, right." Samantha came back at her, "Like I'm really supposed to believe that one. I wouldn't have been able to bring you to a climax if you hadn't told me what it was you needed. Some lover I turned out to be."

"Don't you even go there, Samantha Riley," Alex rebuked, "I'm serious. You made me feel great!" She took the smaller woman in her arms and cradled her as Samantha began to cry.

"Oh, Alex. I so wanted to make you feel like you made me feel, but I had to be told . . ."

"Sam," Alex interrupted her, "I know women who have been gay for years and they still need to be told what a new lover desires. Everyone is different and no one knows right off the bat what will please a new lover. You're being silly." Alex tried to comfort the small blonde.

"You knew, Alex. You knew exactly what to do for me." Samantha retorted.

"Samantha, I didn't. I just did what I wanted to do and was lucky enough to have picked the right movements. Darling, please stop . . . I wouldn't lie to you, honest." Alex said.

"Honest." Samantha wanted to be convinced.

"Girl Scouts honor! And I've been Scouting for Girls a very long time." Alex grinned down at Samantha. "Now give me a hug and stop this nonsense. How are you feeling now?" Alex queried.

"I'm doing just fine, I think. Mostly I'm tired," was the smaller woman's reply.

"Then I guess it's time we got some sleep. We have another busy day ahead of us tomorrow. You need to be thinking about where you want to go when we finish with the boys." Alex informed her lover.

"I'll sleep on it and we can talk it over in the morning." Sam mumbled to Alex as she curled up and wrapped her arm around the taller woman's waist. "Are you comfortable sleeping in this position?" She asked, her green eyes pleading for a positive answer.

"Most certainly. Wouldn't have it any other way. Goodnight, my love. Sleep tight." Those were the last words spoken as Alex could already feel the steady breathing of the woman she held in her arms. She looked upward and silently thanked the Goddess for delivering her from a life of loneliness. She hadn't felt so satisfied or cared for in years. After she gently kissed Samantha on the head she closed her eyes and joined her lover in a pleasantly exhausted sleep.

Continued in Part 8.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to

the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## **Part 8**

### **Chapter 8**

Friday morning arrived, and it seemed as though San Francisco was going to show another side of its weather as Alex looked out the window and gazed at a slightly overcast sky. She was hoping that by the time they were finished at the gym the California sun would once again be shining brightly.

Originally, the gals had decided to go to Sausalito for the afternoon, but Sonny begged and pleaded and looked downright pitiful as he asked the two of them to wait until Saturday to visit the small city on the other side of the bridge so that he and Ray could go with them. Sam stood there smiling through his entire performance and then simply told him that all he would have had to do was ask. She had never been in the area before so everything was new to her. She really didn't care where they went or what she saw first and saving Sausalito until Saturday was just fine with her.

The business discussion in Sonny's office was minimal because most of the paperwork had been finished the day before. Samantha ended up spending less time on the computer and was finished in a short period of time. Ray and Alex again went up to the wall so Ray could see first hand how the holds were placed and how to rearrange them for new climbing paths. Alex wanted to personally make sure there would be no mess ups on this wall and that all the ropes, anchors and holds were checked and in proper working order.

After Samantha finished up the little paperwork that was left she asked Sonny to show her around the rest of the gym. All she had gotten to see so far was the front desk area and the office. He was, of course, more than happy to oblige and gave her the Queen's tour of the place he and Ray had spent the past eight years putting together. It was one of the largest gyms in the area and the clientele was almost exclusively gay and lesbian. After they had finished with the first floor, he took her up to the second and they ended up in front of the newly completed climbing wall. Ray was on one end of the wall with one of the workers. Sonny pointed out to Sam that Alex was on the other end and the two friends made off in opposite directions.

Samantha walked over behind Alex and put her arms around her. "Making sure everything is as it should be this time?"

"Yes, I am." Alex turned around and looked at her lover, remembering that it had only been a couple nights ago when she had caught a falling Samantha in her arms and turned what started out as a friendship into a blossoming love affair. She put voice to her thoughts as she whispered in her lover's ear. "You know, Samantha, if it hadn't been for that faulty anchor, we would probably still be just friends trying to figure out how to take the relationship further." She gave the smaller woman a kiss on the cheek and a quick hug.

"It just adds fuel to the idea that all things happen for the greater good, doesn't it? At least for our greater good in this case." Samantha smiled up into Alex's face, thinking of how lucky she was that she did take that fall. "So, how's it coming along here. Gonna be done by noon?" Samantha wanted to know.

"We just about have everything squared away. Ray knows how to change the paths of the holds, not that he will be the one doing it, and everything has been properly checked out. He's now comfortable with the entire operation. I assured him that adding this element to the gym was a sound business move, so he is feeling really good about the decision."

Alex grabbed the blonde's hand and started walking toward Ray and Sonny. "Actually, Samantha, I believe we are finished here as of right now. Are you ready to turn this trip into a vacation?"

"The entire trip's been a vacation for me," came the reply from the smaller woman as she smiled and tried to keep up with her partner. "Take it easy, Alex. We're not going to run through the rest of the weekend, are we?" Samantha laughed as she pulled on her lover's hand attempting to slow her down.

"I'm sorry, Sam. I guess I'm not used to having someone trying to keep up with me. Either I'm going to have to learn to walk slower, or you are going to have to grow a couple inches." She laughed then told Samantha she was only kidding and that she was perfect just the size she was.

"Uh, huh," was the reply from the blonde, "Sure. You're already making fun of my being vertically challenged, what's next?"

Alex shook her head. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," she grinned as she kept walking toward the guys.

When they got to the other end of the room, Ray and Sonny were standing there looking up at the huge new addition to their gym.

"It's quite a work of art," Samantha noted as she, too, looked up at the wall. "I hope it brings you all the luck that Alex's brought me . . . without having to have anyone fall off, of course." She smiled at the two guys and then up at Alex.

"We're going to call it a day here and get some sightseeing done while the sun's still out," Alex told their friends. "We may even take a trip over to Berkeley now that we aren't going to

Sausalito until tomorrow." She glanced at Sonny and smiled and then turned to face Ray. "Do you think you can handle everything else?"

"Yes, thanks again, Alex. You do realize that you won't be getting rid of us as clients for a long time to come, don't you?" Ray smiled at his friend. "Just because you'll be running your own operation doesn't mean you don't have to keep us up on all the new stuff as it comes out. I'm not about to lose my expert."

"I have agreed to keep a few of my favorite people and of course you and Sonny are at the top of a very short list." Alex gave her friend a hug. "Even if you don't need me for the business, we will always be friends," she said as she looked at one and then the other of the two men.

She had been with them since the inception of their dream or at least from the point at which they were starting to make it come true. It had been a learning experience for all of them and the beginning of an ever evolving friendship. As the gym expanded and grew, so did their ties to each other.

A long time ago Alex had vowed to herself that she would always be there for these two guys as she knew they would always be there for her. Good friendships were a rare commodity in today's world and she was not about to let this one slip through her fingers.

Ray and Sonny had been there with her when she first met Nikki, through the turbulent relationship and finally through the entire breakup. Sonny had even "butched" it up occasionally to give her a solid shoulder to lean on when things were beginning to get out of hand in her relationship and she had no one else to turn to for a sympathetic ear. They had been pillars for her when she made the final break from the woman who had become impossible to live with. Alex had always been strong and pretty much of a loner but when she needed someone to be there as support she knew she could count on the two men she was now standing in front of.

Remembering back, she knew that Sonny could have given her an 'I told you so,' about Nikki, but he never did. It turned out that he had been a better judge of character than she had when it came to Nikki, as he never did really like the woman. She was hoping that his intuitiveness would be right again this time as he and Samantha seemed to hit it off immediately.

"Shall we set a time to meet on Saturday?" Sonny asked as he turned toward Samantha, snapping Alex out of her reverie.

Looking at Sam and Sonny, it was as if they were the ones who had been friends for years instead of having been strangers just two days ago. Alex beamed as she realized how well her friend and her lover were getting along.

"We don't expect to make tonight a really late evening, so why don't you meet us at the hotel at . . . say . . . 9:00 and we'll all go to breakfast and then off to the little city?" Samantha said as she looked over at Alex and received a nod of approval.

Ray also gave a nod, very similar to the one Alex gave.

*It's funny, Samantha thought to herself, how much alike Alex and Ray really are. Does that mean I'm like Sonny? NO!* She dismissed the thought with a small smile.

"Okay. 9:00 it is then. Until tomorrow, ladies." Sonny gave Sam a hug and kiss and as the women turned to go he called after them. "I just can't wait -- we are going to have such a good time! I'll have everything planned."

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The gals stepped out into the now sunny afternoon as Alex's wish had come true and it once again was a beautiful California day. Alex turned to Samantha, "Okay, sunshine, where shall we start, now that Sausalito has been postponed until tomorrow?"

"This isn't my city, Ms. Dorian," Samantha replied trying to keep a straight face. "Where do you think we should go. I know we won't be able to see everything of interest, so pick out what you think I would most enjoy. I trust you, remember?" She winked at her lover which elicited a crooked smile and a raised eyebrow.

"Since you put it that way, let's get something quick to eat and then go up to Twin Peaks. You have an option -- we can either drive up and go directly to the vista point or we can take the scenic route and go for a hike. The hike will take about 20 minutes each way." Alex looked at Samantha waiting for her decision.

Samantha thought for a minute and then answered. "You know the walk sounds intriguing. The only other thing I really want to see before going home is that crookedest street . . . Lombard, I think is the name of it."

"Lombard's right and it's practically around the corner from the hotel, we can either do that on the way back tonight or on the way out in the morning. It will take all of ten minutes to drive," Alex told her.

As they approached the car Alex continued, "Come on, we'll drive on over to 24th and Grand View Avenue and go from there."

"So, these Twin Peaks . . ." Samantha began.

"The original name was of Spanish decent. They were called Los Pechos de la Choca which means 'breasts of the Indian maiden,'" Alex explained.

"That's interesting in and of itself," Samantha giggled. "I'm sorry, go on."

"The south peak is the second highest summit in San Francisco and the north peak is the third," Alex continued to inform Samantha. "Here, let's stop and get some fish and chips, okay?"

"Sounds good to me," the small blonde answered, "I'm getting really hungry and hiking on a full stomach would be a lot better than on an empty one."



They decided to go in and eat rather than do the take out scene and when they were finished Alex drove directly to the intersection of Grand View and 24th and found a parking place. She led the way to an underpass and then up some stairs.

As they walked Alex filled Sam in on bits of San Francisco trivia she had accumulated over the years. They also talked a little more about themselves with Samantha doing most of the talking when it came to the personal stuff. Alex found out that Sam's dad had always been rather domineering and had wanted a son but had gotten two daughters instead. He was against Samantha going to college, believing that all she needed to do was settle down and give him a grandson. He had been trying for the past five years to get her married off. Sam's mom was a housewife who never made a decision without first clearing it with her husband. Alex thought to herself that it was strange that such a strongly independent woman could come out of an environment such as the one Sam was describing. She wasn't looking forward to the day when she would meet the rest of the Riley clan.

Samantha was not homesick for her folks. She loved them but she was happy to be out from under the controlling hand of her dad. The person she did miss from home was her younger sister, Sally. It seemed that the two girls were only a couple years apart and were very close. Alex also learned that Samantha had traded the lake and the woods for the ocean and the beach. It seemed like a fair trade to her and she hoped that Sam wouldn't ever be sorry for the decision. Of course as her mind drifted during the conversation she put on the back burner to begin looking for a piece of wooded land near a lake just in case Samantha ever needed a change.

They walked through a small residential area and Samantha marveled at some of the spectacular views of the Bay and the city. It didn't take long before they reached the base of the peaks and nature reared her head in all her splendor. It was hard to believe that they were still so close to a thriving city when they were standing in a meadow of low-lying shrubbery surrounded with pampas grass, wild mustard and agapanthus.

"Look over there, Samantha," Alex pointed in the direction of a wild mint-flavored plant native to the area known as yerba buena. "Before the city was called San Francisco, it was known as Yerba Buena Village, this area is still dense with the plant. By the way a lot of my trivia is gained from my mom who's a trivia 'nut'," Alex threw in for clarification. "A little farther to go and we'll reach the vista," Alex encouraged Samantha as they continued on an upward slope.

When they finally did reach the top, it was quite clear to Samantha that this had been an excellent choice out of all the places they could have gone for the afternoon. Luckily for them most of the other tourists were down in the city amidst all the cable cars and traffic. At this moment the vista was void of people except for them. They looked down on all the hustle and bustle of the city and were happy that they were up in the clouds with the wild birds and flowers.

Alex draped her arm over Samantha's shoulders as they looked out over the panorama. Looking to the west they could see as far as the Farallon Islands. When they turned to the north, Angel Island, Alcatraz and of course the Golden Gate Bridge were all in view. Alex pointed out the Bay Bridge and Berkeley's Campanile Tower. She also pointed out St. Paul's Church and informed Samantha that the movie "Sister Act" had been filmed there.

After hearing about the movie set Samantha started off on another of her tangents. She told Alex that someday they would have to go up to Hollywood and take in all the tinsel and razzle dazzle. Alex promised it would definitely be a weekender in the not too distant future. She loved the way Samantha's eyes lit up when she spoke of going places with her and she wanted to take the easily excitable woman wherever it was she desired. After the clinic was in full gear and running smoothly they would be able to go anywhere they wanted and Alex was even more anxious now to get everything rolling and set in place.

Alex felt Samantha shiver and realized that even though it was summer, the altitude they were at kept the breeze rather cool.

"Have you seen enough of the city from here?" she asked and received an affirmative nod.

"Let's go back down and see what we can find to occupy the early part of the evening." Alex held Samantha's hand as they took one last look out toward the Bridge and spotted a hawk gracefully gliding on the wind.

"Isn't that beautiful, Alex?" Samantha asked looking up at her lover.

"Not as beautiful as you are," Alex responded as she leaned down and kissed Samantha tenderly.

"That just goes to show that beauty's in the eye of the beholder," Sam chuckled as she pulled away blushing, "I'm not used to being kissed in public, Alex. Aren't you afraid of what people might say or do?"

"Not here I'm not. Besides, if anyone gives us any problems, I can take care of the both of us, no doubt about it." Alex took her hand again and they started walking back down the way they had come.

"What did you have in mind for dinner, Alex? I know we'll be hungry by the time we get back down and to the car."

"Samantha, I don't think I will ever get used to how large an appetite you have for the size of you," Alex answered the blonde. "Listen, I know we promised to do Sausalito tomorrow with the boys, but what do you say to you and I taking the ferry over after we go get some warmer clothes on. I know Sonny will want to drive over the Bridge tomorrow. We can ride over on the water and just have dinner; we won't do any shopping or looking around. I know this really nice seafood restaurant where we can dine outside, after all we won't be staying in Sausalito for dinner tomorrow night. What do you think?" She smiled at her lover and waited for Samantha's response.

"I guess just taking the ferry over for dinner is not like spending the afternoon there. It sounds romantic, a cruise across the water as a prelude to dinner. Yeah, let's go. I know Sonny will understand and I won't look at anything but the restaurant." Samantha hugged Alex and the two of them continued walking back down from the Peaks to the car.

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Less than two hours later the two women were getting out of the car. Alex parked it in a lot near Pier 41 where they would board the ferry. The walk would not have been a long one but time was of the essence and the car would be needed when they arrived back from Sausalito. They had changed into slacks and carried light jackets to protect against the bay breeze. Even if the plan had been to look around, there would only be a couple hours to spend over in Sausalito as the last ferry back to the pier left at 8:00. Since they were only going over for dinner that was no problem. The plan was to take the ferry across, eat and come directly back to the city. With sunsets starting close to eight in the summer evenings the trip back would be a very colorful one.

It was the middle of the day but Samantha still viewed the half-hour ride across the bay as a romantic excursion. Of course, everything they did together was romantic; after all, the honeymoon period of their relationship had barely begun. Alex ushered Samantha to a good viewing spot near the front of the ferry and the trip began.

Standing behind Samantha, Alex put her arms around her lover and drew her close. "You were born to be surrounded by beautiful things," she whispered in Sam's ear.

"As long as you're beside me, I am surrounded by beauty," was the unexpected retort from her lover as she leaned back into Alex's embrace and looked up into vibrant blue eyes.

Alex began pointing out the landmarks as they came close, first of course was the Golden Gate Bridge on their left and then Alcatraz on the right followed by Angel Island. She told Samantha that the name Sausalito was derived from a European name which meant "Little Grove of Willows" because there were so many willow trees around the area. She asked if she knew that Jack London had written *The Sea Wolf* there and had been told, that of course she knew about Jack London, all writers knew that bit of trivia. To change the topic she asked if Samantha knew about Valhalla and the former San Francisco madam, Sally Stranford. Sam admitted to not knowing that much about her but said that she did remember hearing the name. She thought it was even mentioned in her high school history class.

The water was smooth and the trip was a quick, pleasant one. Before they left the hotel Alex had gotten the number of a taxi service in Sausalito and she telephoned from the ferry to have a cab waiting for them when they arrived. The restaurant they were going to, was only about a mile and a half from the dock but she didn't want to waste the time walking. There would be plenty of walking to do tomorrow when they were taking in the sights of the small city.

As was anticipated the taxi was waiting with the meter already ticking, it was the only way the company would sit and wait for such a short trip. In less than 5 minutes they were standing in front of an unpretentious seafood shanty on a side street in the northern part of town, away from the tourist area.

Samantha gave Alex a questioning look. "I know, it doesn't look like much but you will love the atmosphere and the food's delicious," Alex assured the now hungry blonde.

As usual, Alex was right in the choice she had made, the meal was excellent and the atmosphere delightful. They were seated at a small table on the outdoor patio. In the middle of the patio was a huge willow tree decorated with small white, twinkling lights that gave the illusion of fairies dancing in the tree. The tables were scattered at distances that gave the diners all a measure of privacy. Each table was adorned with an already lit candle and the addition of soft music from the speakers hidden high in the tree added a lovely romantic touch to the ambiance. The two women decided on different dishes so they could share. As luck would have it, tonight the chef was serving an indoor clambake, a dish that was only occasionally on the menu, yet one that was very popular with the diners who frequented the small restaurant. Alex ordered the clambake which included lobster, clams, crabs, mussels, corn and potatoes. Samantha ordered a prawns entree. The prawns were sauteed with tequila and garnished with black beans and salsa. The portions were so large that even Samantha didn't have room for dessert. "Perhaps later," Alex smiled at her as she paid the tab. "The evening is still very young and knowing you, hunger will creep into the conversation long before bedtime."

Alex had the waiter call for a cab after he placed the check on the table. She didn't want them to miss the last ferry back to San Francisco. The taxi again was waiting at the door and the ride back to the ferry was a quick couple of minutes.

Back on the boat Samantha turned to Alex and thanked her for a lovely dinner. "It really starts to get chilly around here, even in the summer, once the sun starts to go down, doesn't it, Alex?"

"Chilly, windy, foggy and sometimes down right cold. That's another reason why I chose to put my roots down in Laguna. San Francisco weather is not always to my liking," the taller woman replied. "Now come on over here and I'll keep you warm on the trip back to the city. Look at the Bridge, it really does look golden this time of the evening."

Samantha didn't need to be told twice, she snuggled closer to Alex and looked over toward the Golden Gate. "It's absolutely beautiful. Pictures don't do it justice, Alex. I glad you suggested doing this. Look at those colors," she pointed toward the horizon. "They're as spectacular here as they are in Laguna."

"So, which view would you rather?" Alex was curious to know if Samantha was totally happy living in the Laguna area.

Samantha could feel her lover's arms around her tighten slightly and realized that this was an important question. "Oh, Alex. There's no choice when it comes to actually living in the place. Laguna's small and comfortable; this city can be very intimidating. I love the beach and the temperature is warmer in Laguna." She turned around and smiled up at Alex. Samantha could see in the other woman's expression that her answer was the one Alex had been hoping for. "I love Laguna, and I love you. I hope we can make a life together there."

There she had said it. She had totally committed herself. In her mind there would have been no better place to make such a commitment than out in the middle of the bay while watching the sun set just beyond the famous Golden Gate Bridge. She truly meant what she had said. She intended

to spend the rest of her life with Alex, she only hoped that Alex wanted to make the same kind of commitment to her.

Alex bent over and kissed her on the forehead, "I love you, too, Samantha. Living with you for the rest of my life in Laguna would be the answer to a lifelong dream." Alex held her lover close and contemplated the words she had just spoken. *Please, don't fail me Samantha. I'm putting my trust in you. I had just about given up on people. I was never going to commit again, but I can't help myself when I'm with you.* Her eyes moistened slightly and she blamed it on the ocean breeze. The sun had now receded below the water and the sky was beginning to darken. The short trip back to the city was over and the ferry docked back into Pier 41.

"So, would you like to see a little of the lesbian nightlife in this city, Sam? I know Sonny will have a totally different agenda tomorrow night."

"Lead the way. You're the expert. I'm just along for the ride." Samantha smiled and put her arm around Alex's waist as they departed the boat and walked back onto the Pier.

"Okay, then. Let's get the car and see what kind of fun this town affords its people. Stick close though, I don't want to be having to fight someone over you tonight."

"What do you mean, fighting over me?" Samantha wanted to know.

"If you don't stay close, someone might think you're alone and hit on you and then I'd have to kill 'em!" Alex said with only a slight hint of humor in her voice.

"You won't have anything to worry about. Guaranteed I will not leave your side," Samantha retorted as she sped up to keep abreast of the long-legged woman by her side. "Unless, that is, you keep on walking like I'm almost six feet tall." She laughed as she grabbed onto Alex's arm.

"I'm sorry -- again. You may have to pull on me occasionally until walking slower becomes a habit," Alex responded with a smile. "You want to do elegant, raunchy, or somewhere in between?"

"The in between would probably be the best bet. I don't want to have to be afraid to walk into any of the places," Samantha answered.

"Don't worry, hon. You don't have to be afraid even in the bad part of town. I can take care of myself and you, too." Alex seemed very sure of herself and if she was that confident, Samantha knew there was nothing for her to worry about.

Alex told Sam that although San Francisco seemed to be populated mostly by the males, that the lesbians had been laying groundwork for years and had quite a few establishments of their own.

"We can start out with club closest to the hotel," she told Samantha as she opened the car door and waited for her to slide in. "It used to be a speakeasy but now it's San Francisco's only

women's cabaret. I'm not sure what nights they do the shows anymore; it's been a while since I've been there."

"Sounds as good a place as any to start. I've never been to a lesbian bar so I certainly wouldn't know one from the other. When I was in college I was kind of backward in the social skills department. I hung around with some of the gay guys but never ventured into any of the bars. I was always afraid my folks would find out and hit the roof. They were paying for school and I didn't want to jeopardize that. Guess I was kind of a geek." Samantha smiled over at her lover, unsure of the response she would get from her last statement.

"I don't think you were a 'geek', Samantha. I think that's sweet that you kept your parents' feelings in mind."

"It wasn't their feelings, Alex. I was afraid my dad would hit the ceiling and pull me out of school. It was more fear than sweetness."

"Whatever it was, it kept you innocent and away from all the vultures out there. If you had gone to some of the clubs, you might not be sitting beside me right now." Alex reached over and put her hand on Samantha's knee. "I sure would be the sorry one if that had been the case." She began pulling the car over to the curb. "Here we are."

"I think I'd still be here even if I had been a little wilder. I told you before that I believe we were destined to be together," Samantha said while Alex was parking the car.

"Oh, yeah - Destiny. I almost forgot." Alex said as she finished parking and got out of the vehicle.

"That was really fast. It seems like we're not five minutes from anywhere we want to go in this city. I thought San Francisco was big?" Samantha exclaimed.

"It is big, but most of the bars and restaurants we want to visit are all in the same area, and we're not far from any of them. I think the farthest from us is Wild Side West and that's only about seven miles from the hotel. So we will have a lot of little trips tonight. Ready to go play with the big girls?" She got out and started around to open the door for Samantha. Sam, not being used to that kind of attention was already half way out by the time Alex got there.

"Alex, you don't have to open doors for me. I thought that kind of chivalry went out with the Women's Movement."

"I was just trying to be polite. I like pampering you. It's been a long time since I've felt protective over anyone and the feeling's nice. Besides, I'm a woman so I can still open the door for you if I want to." Alex smiled down at Samantha and took her hand. "Come on, let's go have some fun."

The atmosphere of the club was exciting and intimate at the same time. They first walked through a cozy lounge area where women were just sitting around quietly talking. The lights were dimmed and there was a fireplace in the corner and soft music being piped in from

somewhere else. Some of the women were sitting on the soft, overstuffed furniture, others were crossed legged on the floor and others were doubling up, sitting on someone else's lap. The scene was not one Samantha was used to seeing. She felt like she had just entered a different dimension, a different world, a place very alien to the one she grew up in. Ironically, she felt very much at home in this world of women. It did, however, feel a little odd to have women turning their heads to stare at her as she walked by. This part of her initiation was slightly unsettling and she moved a little closer to her lover. Alex must have sensed her trepidation because she put an arm around Sam's shoulders and drew her close.

"They're more bark than bite, I promise. Eye candy's one of the reasons women come to establishments like this. Most just like to look over the new competition as it comes through the door." She gave Samantha a kiss on her forehead and kept walking toward the music.

"Watch as we walk by and see how they latch onto the girl they came in with. If someone doesn't have someone else on their arm, that's the one to be wary of." Alex smiled at the look of uncertainty on her lover's face. "Sam, lighten up. We're here to have a good time and so are they."

They had just about reached the dance floor and the mood of the room they were entering was very different from the one they had just left. There was a huge dance floor with women of all sizes and shapes dancing with each other. They were dancing in couples, in trios and in groups as well as the occasional lone dancer who didn't seem to need a partner at all. The band up on stage was entirely women. There were small tables on the perimeter and bar stools around the semi-circular bar off to one side -- most of the chairs and stools were occupied and there was not a male in sight.

Alex searched around, found a table for them and sat Samantha down. "I'm going over to get us something to drink. Heaven only knows how long it will take to have someone come over to take an order. What would you like? I don't even know your tastes yet."

"No one would expect you to, Alex. This is our first night out on the town, remember? I think maybe a Long Island Ice Tea would be nice."

"You got it. Be right back." Alex headed off toward the bar leaving Sam to sit and look around in awe.

There were so many things she had not thought about when she realized that she had fallen in love with Alex. Her whole world was now changed; there would be no going back to the person she had been before, and actually she was glad about that. She looked around her, surveying just a small part of her new world. Not since she had lived in the dorm had she seen so many women gathered in one place with not a male face to be sighted. She was looking forward to her new life. The little girl who never belonged anywhere, looked around this room full of females and for the first time in her life didn't feel like an outcast.

Alex was back in no time with their drinks and the two of them sat watching the dancers and talking. Finally the band played a slow song and Alex asked her if she wanted to dance.

*By the Gods*, she thought to herself, *another first*. She could feel her face flush as she looked into eyes that smiled gently at her and a hand that was held out in anticipation of her taking it. She swallowed hard and tried to make the words that were having a difficult time coming out sound natural.

"Sure. I'd love to dance," she said as she got up from her chair.

The band had been playing a variety of songs fluctuating between the 70's and the 90's. When they played "I Need A Hero" Samantha had looked at Alex, smiled and began singing some of the words. She thought she might have seen the dark-haired beauty actually begin to blush. Now they were playing a Savage Garden song that Samantha had always liked, but it had never had a special meaning for her. It certainly would after tonight. From this moment on it would always be 'their song.' She was glad Alex had waited for just the right song before asking her to dance. What she didn't know was that while Alex was up getting their drinks she had put in a song request and had been patiently sitting at the table waiting for the band to play it.

They walked out onto the dance floor and Alex put her arms around Samantha's waist, bending slightly so the smaller woman could place her arms around her neck. The lead singer had a beautiful voice and the words brought tears to Samantha's eyes that she batted back so she wouldn't look like such a silly romantic. The singer continued and Alex sang softly into Samantha's ear, changing the words slightly, "You'll be my dream. You'll be my wish. You'll be my fantasy. You'll be my hope. You'll be my love. Be everything that I need. I'll love you more with every breathe Truly, Madly, Deeply . . . "

Samantha held her tighter and kissed her on the neck.

"I love you, Samantha," Alex whispered.

"I love you, Alex," Samantha whispered back.

They kissed right there on the dance floor, oblivious to the rest of the people around them. Samantha looked up into Alex's eyes and mouthed the words as the singer continued, "I want to live like this forever, until the sky falls down on me." The song ended and the two lovers walked slowly hand in hand back to the table and their drinks.

"You're a great dancer, Alex." Samantha complimented her lover when they sat down.

"You're pretty good yourself." Alex smiled.

"I thought you said you weren't much of a romantic? But you are romantic and you can sing and dance, too!" Samantha grinned at a very embarrassed Alex.

"Those were not words I made up. Anyone can be romantic if the right words are available -- other people's words. They just happened to have written exactly what I feel." She finished drinking her beer and looked over at Sam.



The waitress made her way to their table and Alex ordered another round. They talked a little more and danced, with Samantha quickly learning how to follow Alex's moves. Samantha imagined that a lot of Alex's gracefulness probably came from her martial arts training. She enjoyed being in the taller woman's arms with the music guiding their movements. Sam felt a twinge of jealousy for the women who had been in Alex's arms before her. Jealousy was not an emotion she was familiar with and she wasn't sure she liked the way it made her feel. Dancing had never been one of her favorite things to do. She had liked it well enough but decided the reason she wasn't overly fond of it was because she had never had the right partner before. She tried to get Alex to do some of the faster dances, but Alex turned her down saying that slow was as fast as she got. She said she didn't go in for all the gyrating around the dance floor. It was almost 11:30 when Alex asked if she was ready to move on.

"There's at least one other place I'd like to take you to tonight, but if you'd rather stay put we will." Alex raised a questioning eyebrow, "I can always go get another drink."

"No. If there's another place, I'm game." Samantha finished her drink and placed the glass back on the table. "There, all ready. Where to?"

"Earlier I had thought about going to the Dollhouse, but we can do that another time. Do you play pool Sam?"

"No, can't say that I do. But I could watch you play. That'd be fun." Samantha answered.

"No, I want to do something we both can do. Come on," she said as she stood up and offered her hand to Samantha. "We'll take a walk on the Wild Side. It's a nice little place not far from here."

Alex gave Samantha a little bit of the history of the bar they were traveling to as she drove. It was a throw-back bar where they still played songs from the sixties and occasionally mixed in a few new tunes here and there. It was in one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city. The bar was very popular with the local residents. Janis Joplin had been one of the bar's regulars when she was still alive and living in the area.

They walked in and the place was packed. It was after all a Friday night and the bar scene in San Francisco was still going strong. Samantha couldn't get over how these bars were more than just bars. They took on the demeanor of someone's home to a certain extent and the women all seemed friendly to one another, almost like family.

"Their friendly enough now," Alex confided when Samantha had made the comment. "You just have to be careful who you talk to and sometimes even who you look at. Lesbians can let loose with some really bad tempers when they've had too much to drink."

They passed the pool table and Samantha tried to talk Alex into putting her name on the board for one of the upcoming games, but Alex would have no part of it tonight.

"We'll do that some other time," was all she would comment. "Come on, there's something I want to show you." They continued walking and she opened a door to the outside. "Have a look

at this. They occasionally change it but it always fascinates me." Alex escorted Samantha out the door into the yard where the garden sculptures were decorated with lights. "Isn't this something?"

Samantha's eyes widened as she took in all the lighted topiary. "This is great. A lot of work that goes into something like this." They walked from one sculptured shrub to the next. With Samantha ahhing and oooing every step of the way.

"Look at this Alex," she said pointing to one of the larger figures. "It looks like two women in an embrace. Let's get one of these for the warehouse." She laughed as Alex just stood there smiling and shaking her head.

"You want another drink or are you ready to call it a night?" Alex asked the blonde as she slowly led her back to the building.

"I don't care, your call." Samantha answered her.

"There's one thing I want to do before we leave, some people I want to meet you." Alex looked around the lounge area for an empty table or chair. "Here, let me get you seated, I want to see if the owner's around tonight. She and her lover are old friends of mine." They found a table in the corner and Alex went and got their drinks. She put Samantha's drink on the table and kept hers in her hand. "You be okay here for a minute or two?" she asked Sam.

Samantha nodded an affirmative and smiled, "Go find your friends, I'll be fine."

"Don't talk to strangers," Alex whispered as she kissed Samantha on the ear. "I'll be right back."

"Don't you trust me, Alex?" Samantha

"It's not you I don't trust, it's the sharks that swim on land and circle around all the bait. You're the bait, sweetheart." Alex smiled and then took off across the room.

Alex was only gone a few minutes, but it seemed much longer. Samantha did the 'friendly smile' and nod to two or three women who smiled and nodded to her first as they walked by. She also politely refused one, 'Can I buy you a drink' -- one, "Would you like to go inside and dance?" and answered "Yes," to a question of -- 'Is this seat taken.'

She became anxious about Alex being gone when a tall, thin, blonde with dark, haunting brown eyes approached the small table and sat down in Alex's chair.

"I'm sorry," Samantha smiled at the stranger. "That chair is taken; I'm just waiting for my date to return."

"Oh?" The stranger looked at Samantha in an almost menacing way. She seemed to be studying the small blonde who had just a second ago been sitting alone. "So, your **date**," she seemed to almost spit the word date, "has abandoned you, huh?"

"No," Samantha replied. "I didn't say that -- she went looking for some friends. She'll be back any minute now. If you don't mind I would rather wait for her alone." Samantha looked at the woman with as strong a look as she could muster. This stranger made her feel panicked for some reason and so she concentrated on Alex coming back.

"Well, we wouldn't want your **date** to get the wrong impression, seeing me sitting here with you, now would we?"

"There would be no *wrong impression*," Samantha replied. "There would be no reason for any impression at all. I would appreciate it if you would just leave."

The tall blonde stood up as if to go and then leaned back down and whispered in Samantha's ear. "Be careful who you bed, Brat. Many people have horrible skeletons in their bedroom closets." She gave a spine chilling laugh and sauntered away and back into the bar area.

Samantha sat there dumfounded for a few minutes staring in the wake of the stranger's footsteps. She wondered what in Tartarus the woman could have been talking about.

Finally, she saw Alex come through the doorway and breathed a sigh of relief. She decided at that very moment not to get her riled by telling her she had been 'hit on.' Everyone had been exceedingly polite except for the tall blonde, so she decided just to forget the passes, the offers and the strange conversation, even though it puzzled her.

"The owners are out of town for the weekend," Alex told Samantha. "We'll just have to come back up some other time and I'll introduce you to them." She put her empty bottle on the table and suggested they call it a night.

"We might get into bed before the sun comes up if we leave now. You look like you might be getting tired, Samantha."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Samantha began, going on one of her now anticipated monologues. "We get up at the crack of dawn, go over to the gym, walk up the mountain and back down again, go on a boat ride, which in and of itself is tiring, and then traipse all over the city drinking alcohol. Why would anyone think I'd be tired. Hungry, maybe -- but tired?" She laughed and put her head on the table. She looked up to see a stunned look on her lover's face.

"Alex -- I was kidding. I had a marvelous day. I've seen more in one day than . . . I don't know when . . . it's been great. But -- you're right, I am starting to get a little tired. I don't think I even realized it until you left me sitting here and I started going over the entire day in my mind. I'm thoroughly, but very pleasantly exhausted. Going back to the hotel sounds great." She smiled up at Alex and saw that the frown had disappeared and was replaced once more by the crooked smile she had already learned to love.

Alex lifted an eyebrow and very seductively said, "Then . . . let's go home."

The ladies walked out of the bar and back toward where they had parked the car. Because of the late hour of their arrival, parking -- which is always a problem in the city, was even more so. They had to walk two blocks but neither of them minded that, they never seemed to run out of conversational topics.

The street was not very well lit but Alex was familiar with the neighborhood and felt quite secure. She put her arm around Samantha as they walked. After they had gone about a block, Alex had the distinct feeling that someone was watching them. She had learned a long time ago to trust her feelings. She slowed their pace to listen more intently and heard barely audible voices coming from just behind them.

Samantha felt the tightening of Alex's arm around her shoulders and sensed that it was not romance that prompted the change in pressure. "What's the matter, Alex," she asked her partner.

"Shhh . . . just listen," came the response from the taller woman as she turned her head slightly to hear behind her.

It was at this point that the distraction made itself known. Three punks came almost running at them from behind. At first Alex thought they would just go past but as soon as she was able to see the looks on their faces, she realized that that was not to be the case.

The first hoodlum came up in front of Alex, the second in front of Sam and the third stepped behind the two women.

"What do you want?" Alex asked straightening up to her full height and holding Samantha close.

"Just a little fun," said the punk standing in front of her, "Right, Bud?"

"Yeah, just some fun. Wanna play with us dyke?" the one called Bud asked.

"Not particularly, and I don't think you really want to mess with me, either," was Alex's answer to the ribbing.

"We could just play with your girlfriend then," the third ruffian uttered in a depraved tone.

"You . . . don't . . . even . . . want . . . to go . . . there," Alex said very slowly and quietly.

Samantha looked up and the expression on her lover's face made her blood chill. She had never seen Alex look so menacing.

"What'a ya gonna do about it - Dyke?" the ugly one with the spiked hair glared at Alex. "We just want to show Blondie here what she's missing." And he made a vulgar gesture grabbing at himself.

The veins in Alex's neck tightened, and her eyes became daggers. Samantha could tell that it was all she could do to keep from going after the three creeps. But three against two didn't leave them very good odds in Samantha's estimation.

"Please . . . leave us alone," Samantha quietly pleaded.

"Shhh, Samantha," Alex whispered in her ear, "Let me handle this."

"We're going to keep walking and you're going to get out of the way and let us pass." Alex spat at the so-called leader of the little group. "Don't make me angry. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry." Alex pulled Samantha even closer as they attempted to walk past the obstacles blocking their way.

"Oh, you think so -- big, bad butch?" the ringleader spouted. "This bitch is really scaring me, how about you guys?" He looked at his friends and laughed then put his hand into his pocket and brought out a switchblade.

"Come on, bitch, I need some excitement," he sneered as he stepped closer to Alex with his arm extended, knife blade out.

"Wrong move, baby boy," Alex said as she grabbed the outstretched arm and twisted it. At almost the same instance she brought her right leg up and kicked him in the chest still holding onto to his hand. When he went down she lifted her left leg and brought it down on the taunt twisted elbow. There was an audible crack, a scream of pain and the clink of steel as the knife hit the pavement.

The punk behind her assessed what was happening and thought he could take her out while she was still occupied with his friend.

Wrong move.

She caught his motion out of the corner of her eye, turned and did a little jump, scissored her legs in the air and kicked him squarely in the face.

That was all the third culprit needed to see. With his two companions rolling in agony on the ground, the coward high-tailed it away from the angered woman as quickly as he legs would carry him.

Alex turned back around to Samantha. "You okay, honey?" She grabbed the stunned woman and pulled her close. "No one will harm you as long as I'm around. You got that?" Still shaking, Samantha just nodded her head and wrapped her arms around her lover as they walked into the street to avoid stepping over the two bodies lying in anguish on the sidewalk and lawn.

Alex pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and started to dial 911, thought better of it and closed the phone back up. The bully with the broken elbow was making his way over to his friend who was on his knees holding his face in both hands and crying like a baby. She was sure

they would be long gone before the police would have arrived. She thought about staying around and making sure they got to say hello to San Francisco's finest, but decided that taking Samantha away from the area as soon as possible was a better idea. "Lucky creeps," she mumbled to herself as they continued to walk away from the scene.

"You'd think someone would have come out to help us," Samantha said when she finally found her voice.

"No, people are too afraid to get involved these days. It's late and most of these folks around here are in bed. Anyway, I had it all under control." She smiled at Samantha and kissed her on the head. "Come on, let's go home."

The ride back to the hotel was a short and quiet one, each of the women lost in her own thoughts.

Alex broke the silence as they turned into the hotel parking garage. "I'm sorry that had to happen to you tonight, Samantha. There are crazies everywhere and I don't think it would have mattered if we were just two straight women walking home. Those guys were out for trouble tonight, any kind of trouble. We just happened to be the ones who walked by. Unfortunately for them, though, they found me."

"Maybe they'll think twice about attacking women on the street from now on. You really know how to handle yourself, Alex. I only I hope I never see that side of you going against me . . ."

"Don't be silly," Alex interrupted. "I don't want to hear you talk like that, ever. I would never do anything to hurt you, Samantha. What we just finished with was a life and death-type situation. I'm sorry if I scared you, but there was no other way to handle those creeps." Alex's face took on a look of contrition.

"I . . . didn't . . . I don't . . . mean it that way. Yeah -- you scared me, but I now know there's a dark side to you, a side that I hadn't seen before. I guess I just didn't know you could be so . . . aggressive. But Alex, again you were my hero." Her green eyes sparkled as she looked over at the woman who had just battled unfair odds for her honor.

"Don't look so down. I'm trying to say thank you," Samantha finished.

"You don't have to do that. I feel it's my job now to look after you and see that nothing harms you. You don't have to thank me for protecting someone I love. Come on. Let's get up to the rooms it's almost 1:30 and you set an early morning rendezvous with our little friends." Alex turned off the car and they proceeded up to the rooms.

Back in the suite, Alex double locked the doors, went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. "Samantha, you want a glass of wine with me?" she asked downing half of hers and refilling it.

"That'd be nice," came the reply from the bathroom. "I'll be right there."

"Before all that mess happened I was going to ask if we could go for a midnight snack somewhere, but that little confrontation actually squelched my appetite. Nothing ever does that!" She walked over to where Alex was standing and took the wine that was held out to her.

"It had been quite a good day before that happened, hadn't it?" Alex asked her lover.

"It's still been quite a good day. I won't let that unpleasantness spoil these last couple of days for us. Are you okay, Alex?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Want to take a shower with me? I need to get the stench of those miscreants off my body."

"Shower, sure. Just what the doctor ordered," she answered as she walked toward the bathroom behind the taller woman.

Alex got in first and stood under the hot running water. Samantha joined her and stood in front of Alex letting the water run on both of them. She grabbed the washcloth on the rail and lathered it up then turned around and faced her lover. "Here, let me wash you. You just stand there and let the water run on you. She began at the neck, slowly and gently sudsing her lover from top to bottom then stepped out of the way so Alex could rinse. She lathered herself while Alex was getting the soap off her body and then stepped back in front of Alex to rinse herself off.

"There all trace of the bad guys is gone," Samantha told her lover as she faced her once again and wrapped her arms around the body she was beginning to know almost as well as her own. "I love you Alex. I don't think what happened tonight happened because of who we are but because we were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Alex looked down into eyes that obviously worshiped her and a tear of relief fell and mingled with the water as she bent down and passionately kissed her lover. She knew in her heart that this small person she now held in her arms was hers to protect. Anyone trying to harm Samantha was going to have to go through her to do it and that would not be an easy accomplishment.

Minutes later the two women were side by side in bed, too tired to think of anything other than sleep. The day ahead was going to be a busy one and knowing Sonny it was going to be a day to go down in their memory books.

Alex turned out the light on the nightstand and held Samantha close. She tenderly kissed her good night. "You're my world now, Samantha. No one is going to harm my world."

Continued in Part 9.

# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 9

### Chapter 9

The remainder of the night/morning had not been an easy one. Twice Alex had awoken to Samantha mumbling, "No . . . please . . . leave us alone." She had tightened her hold on her partner and whispered soothing words as she stroked her hair to calm the fitfully sleeping woman. The experience in the wee hours of the morning had definitely not been conducive to a peaceful rest. To top it all off, because of the lack of sleep, Alex had slept later than usual. It was almost 8:15 and the guys would be knocking on the door in less than an hour. At least they had showered before going to bed so getting ready would not take that long.

"Samantha. Wake up honey. Pretty soon we're gonna have company. I over slept." She gently nudged the smaller woman who was still curled up in the crook of her arm.

Making soft cooing sounds Samantha simply tightened her hold on Alex's waist.

"No, no. That's not gonna work; it's time to get up. We have a busy day, today." She kissed her lover tenderly on the head and shook her again. "Don't make me have to get up and carry you to the shower, Samantha." Alex laughed as she tickled the small blonde.



"Okay, okay - I give -- I'm up -- I'm up," the smaller woman tried to catch her breath from laughing as she wiggled away from her lover and rolled off the bed still clinging to her pillow.

"I'll get you back for this; you wait!" she continued laughing as she threw the pillow and hit Alex in the head.

Alex started after her and she ran to the bathroom, slamming the door and holding it shut with her weight while trying to figure out how it locked.

"You don't actually think you can hold me out of there -- do you?" the larger woman asked as she quickly put her weight against the outside of the door, easily pushing it open.

"Okay, now you've asked for it, hit-and-run, that's a major offense." Alex walked over and picked Samantha up throwing her over her shoulder. She carried her back into the bedroom and threw her on the bed.

"Hey. No fair. You have an unfair advantage," Samantha rambled on as she landed flat on her back.

"You don't know how lucky you are," Alex grinned at the woman she held captive on the bed.

"Oh, yeah?? What'd ya gonna do?" Sam said taunting Alex.

"If we weren't in such a hurry, you'd be finding yourself being soaked at this very minute." Instead she leaned down, holding Samantha's wrists with her hands, the smaller woman's arms above her head and passionately kissed her good morning.

"You really get my juices flowing, my lovely," she said as she released Samantha from her grasp.

"Unfortunately we have to get dressed right now!" She let go of Samantha's wrists, grabbed her arms and pulled her back up into a standing position.

"I can certainly say I like the way you torture a person," Samantha laughed, then she suddenly became very serious as the impish smile disappeared. "Alex - I'm having a hard time letting go of last night. I don't want it to spoil our day, but I still have this horrible violated feeling . . ."

Long, slender fingers tenderly touched her lips to prevent the continuation of the sentence.

"Samantha, I know how much it's bothering you," the taller woman started, "you talked in your sleep last night. I know you're troubled." Sympathetic sapphire-colored eyes stared lovingly into two emerald green pools beginning to overflow with tears.

"Come on, honey, don't." Alex brushed away a salty drop that trickled down the smaller woman's cheek. "Remember your coincidence thing? Maybe there was a reason those thugs ran into us. Maybe we needed to be there to teach them a lesson." Alex smiled and drew Samantha closer to her, uncertain how to reassure her lover.

"Yeah," Samantha began with a sigh, "Maybe they needed their butts kicked by My Hero." She hugged Alex tightly then looked back up into eyes the obviously adored her. "I'll let it go - I promise - back to the happy thoughts!"

"I don't have all the answers, Sam, but I do know that you're safe with me." Alex held Samantha in her arms and whispered in her ear, "I will try my best to be the hero you think I am."

"Now, I get one more good morning kiss before we spend the rest of the day in the company of friends." Once again she drew Samantha close and kissed her tenderly. "I love waking up with you beside me, Samantha. It starts my day on a positive note."

"I'd love waking up next to you, too, except I usually don't -- mostly you're already up and out of the bed by the time I get my eyes open." Samantha chimed in after being released by her lover. "But I do so like the idea of your face being one of the first things I'll see upon awakening for the rest of my life."

"Let's see if you still feel that way 30 years from now!" Alex said as she walked out of the bedroom.

"I'll put some tea on. Go ahead and dress for the morning and afternoon. I'll make sure we get some time to come back here to shower and change before doing the evening on the town. I always feel gritty after a day out in the wind and weather." Alex grabbed the portable coffee machine and proceeded to make a pot of tea. She then went back into the bedroom to get dressed for the excursion to the city across the bay.

Samantha was trying to decide which went better with her short sleeved lavender tee, the khaki shorts or the bibbed denim shorts. She hated clothing decisions. She already had the shirt on and her new lavender jade necklace matched it perfectly.

"The shorts or the bibbed denims, Alex? Which do you like better?"

"The bibbed shorts would look good. Gives you that innocent farm girl look," she answered and smiled over at the blonde holding up the two pieces of clothing.

"What are you wearing?" Samantha asked Alex.

"Oh, a pair of cargo shorts, you know with the pockets and probably my blue sleeveless shirt. Does that meet with your approval?" Alex smiled over at Samantha. "Been a while since I needed to check with anyone before dressing myself." She winked at the smaller woman which erased the almost pouting look that was coming over her face.

"I didn't mean it like that . . . I was just asking . . ." Samantha started.

"I know, I know -- I'm only kidding with you, Samantha. Lighten up." Alex shook her head smiling as she stepped into her shorts.

They finished dressing with the usual in and out of the bathroom rituals - teeth, hair, face . . . and managed to complete all the necessary activities just as a knock was heard on the door.

"Let's go, ladies," came the sound of Sonny's voice through the door, "the day's a waiting and we have lots to do."

"Keep your shorts on," Alex shouted on her way to let the guys in. "We're actually ready this time."

She opened the door and with a sweeping motion bid her friends to enter. "No one could ever say you weren't punctual, Sonny."

"That's for sure," Ray agreed. "He wants to leave the house a half hour early when we're only going down the street!" He gave Alex a '*you know what I go through*' look and cocked his head toward his lover.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah -- whatever! At least I'm never late. I hate it when people are late!" Sonny walked over to the window and looked out at the water. "Nice view." He turned around to face Alex and his face lit up as Samantha came into the room.

"Don't you look nice, sweetness! I absolutely love those bibbed shorts on the right people and that color -- it's you." He sauntered over to his new friend, arms out, "I love that necklace! Wherever did you get it?"

"Alex bought it for me when we were in Chinatown," Samantha answered her friend, delighted to be able to show off the new gems. "Isn't it beautiful? It's lavender jade." She let Sonny admire the necklace and earrings as she glanced over at Alex and smiled.

"It's a very unusual piece, Sammie. That unicorn on top is perfect. What a lucky girl you are! Alex is going to spoil you rotten; I can tell that already. Better keep hold of her; you're in for a wild ride!" He smiled from one friend to the other and then clapped his hands together. "Okay - we're all here and we're all ready to go. So . . . let's get this show on the road. First stop Golden Gate Bridge on the way to Sausalito and breakfast."

On the way down in the elevator, Ray informed the girls that Sonny had insisted on bringing the convertible. He figured since neither of them had long hair to muss up that they wouldn't mind. Sonny's reasoning had been that it was a beautiful morning and that Samantha ought to be able to get a good look at the Bridge and all the sights along the way. Alex told Ray that the convertible was fine and Sonny was probably right about getting to see the big picture while they were driving instead of having to look out of windows.

Alex asked if they could go down Lombard Street first, because Samantha had requested seeing the crookedest street in the world and she had promised to take her down. Sonny agreed to the small variance in his schedule and decided to play guide as they pulled out of the hotel parking garage.

"So Sammie," Sonny began, "do you know anything about Lombard Street?"

"Only that it's labeled the crookedest street in the world. What more is there to know?"

"You need to know that the crooked part is only between Leavenworth and Hyde and that the street was originally built in the 1920s. The horses weren't able to get up the steep grades in San Francisco so they figured by making the street go from side to side and kinda bend back on itself the horses would be able to manage to walk up the grade."

"It's a real bitch to drive down," Ray mumbled under his breath.

"I'm sorry," Samantha replied as she heard the quiet complaint. "We could have walked down later."

"No. Don't be silly," Ray countered, realizing that Samantha was getting upset for having put her friend through what she thought was too much trouble. "I'm not totally awake yet and I have to pay attention to where the street goes, it may be difficult to maneuver in the car, but walking doesn't let you experience the full impact of the switchbacks. The only way to truly appreciate Lombard is to drive down it." He glanced over at his friend and gave her a small smile. "Enjoy the ride, Samantha, it's a short one."

In no time at all they were down the block and headed toward the Golden Gate Bridge. Sonny pointed out spots of interest along the way and tried to fill the girls in with what he had planned for their Saturday. Samantha couldn't believe that the color of the bridge up close was not the golden it seemed from a distance.

"Well, there's one illusion smashed," Samantha quipped as they neared the base of the bridge. "But the bridge is still beautiful and the view from here is gorgeous!"

Sonny played tour guide and filled Samantha in on all the historical facts about Sausalito. She heard about the Miwok Indians, who were some of the first inhabitants and the arrival of the Spanish ship 'San Carlos.' She found out that in the early 1900s the small town became a haven for rum runners and bootleggers because of prohibition - people and goods traveled to and from Sausalito on the newly acquired car ferry boats, making the train obsolete. But the most interesting part of his little lecture was when he got to the 'golden age' of Sausalito, starting right after World War II and continuing until 1966. The small city across from San Francisco drew to its shoreline a large variety of writers and artists including Jack London. Of course no tour guide worth his salt would forget Valhalla and the infamous Sally Stranford. By the time Sonny ran out of historic tidbits they were across the bridge and Ray was pulling into a private drive.

"Parking is horrible over here but weekends are the pits," Sonny continued changing the subject to the day at hand. "We have friends who live close to Bridgeway as you can see and they said we could park in their driveway for the day. I'd introduce you gals to them, but they've taken a mini holiday to Tahoe." He turned around and looked at Sam. "The four of us will have to go there some day. Alex needs to start spending some of that money she has stashed away on some fun stuff."

"Right," Alex answered, "I put most of my 'stashed' money into that clinic of mine and you know it! I'm sure you remember what it took to get the gym off the ground."

"Whatever! Ms. money bags! You couldn't spend all your money if you tried. But let's talk of something more interesting . . ."

"Food?" Samantha interrupted as they all exited the car.

"Yes, sweetness," Sonny smiled at her, "Food. The restaurant's just down the street. They have an patio area and we can gawk at all the house boats and try to guess what kind of people live in them while we eat breakfast." He gave her a big hug and they started off down the street with Sonny and Samantha in the lead, Ray and Alex bringing up the rear.

Breakfast was a big success. The restaurant belonged to another of Sonny and Ray's friends so there was no waiting for an excellent view table. The food was superb and even Samantha was full when they left to go explore the rest of the city. As it turned out Sonny and Sam were the shoppers in the group -- as if everyone didn't know that to begin with. He escorted her to all the cute, interesting, expensive and esoteric shops along the main drag and then scooted her off to some of the less commonly know places where the local artists displayed their goods. Ray and Alex simply walked a few paces behind at all times, talking about business and occasionally sitting outside the stores while the other two went in to shop.

Along the way Samantha bought some candles that she couldn't do without and a quaint little pen and ink from one of the locals. Sonny purchased incense and a new burner as well as an inspirational climbing picture that he planned on hanging near the new wall in the gym. The afternoon was a roaring success and the bonding of Sonny and Samantha was obvious to their lovers who watched as the two continued to shop, gossip and giggle.

Around 2:30 Samantha's hunger alarm started going off and they stopped at one of the open cafe's for lunch. Sonny warned that they would be eating at eight and Alex informed him that Samantha seemed to have a hollow leg that needed to be filled quite often. She told him not to worry, that by eight Sam would be well on the way to starving again.

Alex and Ray sat in front of yet another store waiting for their lovers to come out. "You know Alex, I don't think I ever remember Sonny taking to anyone quite as quickly as he has to your Sam," Ray told Alex. She seems like a super person. I think you've got yourself a 'keeper' as Sonny would say."

"I think you're right," came the answer from his friend. "They get along well, don't they? Alex asked.

"Sonny and Sam -- they get along great," Ray agreed.

"I think Sonny's a good judge of character. I probably should have listened to him when he told me Nikki would be nothing but trouble." Alex shook her head remembering the conversation she

and her friend had over her involvement with the volatile Nikki. She quickly put the old memory back into storage, not wanting it to infringe upon this happy day.

You're right, though," Ray said, giving Alex a subtle smile. "My Sonny's pretty good at reading people. He never did give you the old *'I told you so'* about Nikki, did he?" The quiet man, who usually let his partner do most of the talking, looked over at his friend. "He thinks the world of you, Alex. So do I. We're glad we've all become friends as well as business acquaintances."

Alex smiled back at the dark-haired man sitting next to her. "I feel the same way about you two."

Almost embarrassed to be seemingly baring their souls to one another the two ended the conversation as quickly as it had begun and looked out at the expanse of water across from the shop. They soon heard familiar voices and turned as the two prodigals exited the store. Samantha was grinning from ear to ear as she walked toward Alex. She opened her bag to and pulled out a cut little Beanie Baby unicorn. "Isn't it simply precious?"

"Yeah, precious," was the reaction from her lover. "Are you two almost finished here?"

Samantha looked over at Sonny and he nodded an affirmative. "I guess we are, if Sonny says we are," she smiled at Alex and gave her a quick hug.

"Let's take a look at the sea life in Sausalito as we make our way back to the car," Sonny called back to Alex and Ray. As he turned back around two roller-bladers almost knocked him and Samantha to the ground. Sam got a little more upset at the incident than seemed necessary and Alex rushed to her side to comfort her.

"Hey, girl -- they certainly weren't watching where they were going but . . ." Sonny began and stopped in mid-sentence as Alex shot him a shut the Hell up look.

"It's okay, honey, they were just kids," she said as she soothed the small blonde whose arms were around her waist in a death grip. "It's okay, I gotcha," she continued as she kissed the top of Samantha's head.

"I'm sorry," Sonny finally said, "But . . ."

"I wasn't going to mention it," Alex said, "but we had a run-in with a few wanna-be thugs early this morning when we left the bar. Sam didn't sleep too well and I think she's still a little shook up," Alex began and then filled the guys in with most of the details.

"Hey, I'm terribly sorry, Sweetness! It's men like that who give us all a bad name!" Sonny said, "Come on, group hug." He joined Alex and Sam and nodded to Ray who merely smiled. "Hey -- I know Alex musta made short work of those bad boys for ya, now didn't she?"

Samantha nodded and smiled at her friend, regaining her composure and apologizing to everyone for overreacting. She smiled but her mind went back to the night before -- the guys in the street

and the blonde in the bar -- *Strange people up here in San Francisco*, she thought and decided that Laguna was much more to her liking.

"That's okay," Sonny began, "Let's go look at the seals - they make you forget everything unpleasant. We won't have time to go to the Marine Mammal Center so that's saved for your next trip."

The four friends walked on toward the jetting rocks where the seals of Sausalito congregated. As they approached the area they could hear the barking sounds getting louder and louder until it was almost deafening. They stopped to take pictures in front of the bronze sea lion along the waterfront and then continued on toward the rocks. There seemed to be a rivalry going on between two of the younger males. They were pushing and barking at one another and a large crowd was beginning to gather to watch the face-off.

"Probably fighting over some silly female," Sonny commented as he smiled and turned toward Samantha. "Some species never learn," he laughed.

"Oh, come on," Samantha retorted. "You think the males fighting over another male would be any different? Jealousy and dominance are the same no matter what." She laughed at her friend as he shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the confrontation in front of them.

After about 10 minutes of watching the comings and goings of the little sea community, Ray looked at his watch and suggested that their time in the small city should be brought to an end if they were to get to the dinner show on time. Everyone agreed and they started back across the Bay.

It seemed as though they timed their departure perfectly. The traffic was starting to get heavy coming into Sausalito from the big city and Ray assured everyone that the opposite traffic would soon be a match as it was Saturday night.

The guys deposited the gals off at the hotel and gave them a two-hour time limit. Alex promised they would be ready as she ushered Samantha off toward the lobby.

"So, Samantha, how did you like Sausalito?" Alex asked as they entered the elevator.

"Oh, Alex. I had a great time. Your friends . . ." Samantha was gently interrupted . . .

"Honey, I think you can safely use the term "our friends" when you talk about Sonny and Ray," Alex told her. "You and Sonny get along great and I'm thrilled. They're two of the nicest people I know."

"You're right, I do feel like they're my friends, too. Sonny's a lot of fun and he thinks the world of you, which endears him to me even more," the small blonde added they arrived at the suite and went inside.

"Okay we have about two hours like Sonny said -- how long will it take you to get ready?" Alex shot a side glance at Sam with a raised eyebrow and crooked smile.

"In a pinch I could be ready in about 45 minutes," the blonde answered hurrying toward the bathroom and leaving a trail of clothes along the way.

Alex followed behind her, picking up the clothes Sam had thrown and taking off her own. "We don't want the boys to absolutely know what we did in the extra time they gave us, now do we?" She laughed as she finished undressing and entered the bathroom where Samantha already had the tub filling with fragrant bubbles.

"Come on in -- the water's fine," she enticed Alex with sparkling Irish eyes.

"I'm on my way," came the response as Alex stepped into the warm tub. She sat down and stretched out her arms. "Come here and let me hold you." She pulled Samantha toward her, arms around the smaller woman's waist as she nibbled contentedly on Sam's ear and neck. "Now this is the way to take a bath."

"You're going to do more than just take a bath if you don't stop giving me love bumps!" Samantha told her lover.

"Promises, promises," Alex replied as she continued with baby kisses down Sam's neck and back.

"Alex, I'm serious . . . you're gonna start something you won't have time to finish," Samantha warned.

"Oh, I'll have time to finish - I'll make it a quickie."

Alex turned Samantha around to face her and picked up the soap from the side of the tub. She quickly lathered the soap on Sam's body and then on her own. Then she picked up the washcloth and rinsed the bubbles off both their bodies. "Okay, we're done," was the statement she made as she undid the stopper and let the water start to drain.

Alex stood up and pulled Sam up beside her. Grabbing the two closest towels she wrapped Samantha in one of the them and herself in the other then before the small blonde realized what was happening she was being picked up out of the tub and carried back into the bedroom.

"It's going to be a long night and we may be tired when we get back here," Alex muttered as she laid Samantha down on the bed. "You're beautiful when you're glistening," she smiled as she positioned her body next to her lover and began patting her dry with the towel.

Samantha could stand it no longer and wrapped herself around the taller woman smothering her with kisses. "I love you Alex Dorian," was the last complete sentence spoken, followed by half finished sentences, moans of pleasure and sighs.



Alex glanced over at the clock on the nightstand with a look of accomplishment and sparkling blue eyes. "And so, my Destiny," she began as she slowly traced circles in the stomach of the small smiling blonde laying beside her, "do you realize that we have exactly 45 minutes to finished getting dressed?"

"That's just great - I want to lay here and relive what moments ago happened to my body and you want me to jump up and get dressed!" Samantha rolled over on her side and stared into glimmering sapphire orbs.

"Your call, honey," Alex kidded her, "wanna stay here or go play with the boys?"

"What I want and what I should do at this point are two entirely different things. I might also add that it's not fair of you to give me that kind of option," the smaller woman smiled at her lover.

"Oh, Samantha, don't you know that the 'Fair's in Del Mar'?" Alex laughed as she got up from the bed grabbing Samantha's hands and standing her up, also. "You don't want to disappoint Sonny now do you? He's so looking forward to showing you his town."

"No, I don't want to disappoint Sonny," Samantha retorted, "I'm up, aren't I?"

"You're up because I pulled you up," Alex laughed. "Come on, let's get dressed."

Alex had told Sam to dress casually as she knew they'd be going to a couple different clubs and there was no need not to be comfortable. She took her khaki cargo slacks and a shirt off the hangers and examined them to make sure they didn't need to be ironed. She felt herself lucky as there didn't seem to be any wrinkles. Samantha decided on the pair of dark green capri pants she had brought along with a lighter green blouse that enhanced the color of her eyes and accentuated the blonde of her hair. She also had a small yellow/green butterfly clip for her hair with earrings and a necklace to match.

"My -- don't we look meadowy tonight," Alex said as she caught a glimpse of her lover in the bedroom mirror.

"Too much green?" came the unsure question.

"No, you look great in green. I was kidding with you," Alex explained. "You have to stop taking everything I say at face value, Samantha."

"Maybe it would be easier if you didn't say it with such a solemn look on your face," the smaller woman chided her lover. "When you smile then I know you may be kidding me, otherwise I'm afraid you don't like what I'm wearing or doing."

Samantha walked into the bathroom and stood beside her lover as she brushed her teeth and then her hair. "There, I'm completely ready with at least . . ." before the words were out of her mouth there came a knock on the door.

"Hi, girls. Ready to party?" Sonny's voice rang through loud and clear.

The two women looked at each other, smiled and shrugged their shoulders. "Guess you finished in the nick of time," Alex said as she walked to the door to let their friends in.

"Okay -- party time!" Sonny said waltzing into the room and up to Samantha. "Turn and let's see -- nice, very nice," he commented to Samantha. "Alex -- same old, same old," he smiled at his old friend. "Everyone looks ready, so let's boogie! First stop dinner and show. This place has some of the best drag queens in the country, I swear! To The Castro boys and girls!" Sonny exclaimed as the four of them exited the hotel and headed for the car.

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The trip from the hotel to The Castro was another short one and Sonny had picked an establishment that had valet parking so they had one of the biggest headaches of his fair city taken care of. The entrance was down a winding spiral staircase and the door was reminiscent of an old speakeasy from the roaring 20's. Sonny was his usual gabby self explaining the history of the restaurant and that the bar and show were actually there before the restaurant. Ray, as usual, seemed to be along for the ride, mentioning something only occasionally, if Sonny forgot a detail.

"Don't be shocked if you walk into the ladies room and find some rather tall, even taller than Alex, "ladies" who stand when they pee," Sonny warned Samantha. "Some of these girls don't realize that they're really boys and after all, this is their club."

"Okay -- thanks for the warning," Samantha told her friend then turned around looking at the variety of people at the surrounding tables. "I don't mean to stare but this is fascinating! Some of these men are absolutely gorgeous -- I feel intimidated!"

"Yeah, but they're not all beauty "queens." Look a little closer," Sonny said as he poked her in the side. "See --over there -- he should have stayed a "he". I look better in drag than that. Hell, Ray looks better in drag than that!" Sonny snorted.

The waiter arrived and gave them their choice of the two main entrees and took their drink orders. By the time dessert had arrived the show was about to begin. Sonny had purposely chosen this particular club because they didn't perform the show during dinner but started when dinner was almost over.

The first queen out must have weighed about 300 pounds and looked like "she" had been around forever but "she" had a personality that wouldn't quit and got the audience in the mood to be entertained. Unfortunately for Samantha "she" had asked if it was anyone's first time at the show and Sam raised her hand before Alex could stop her. That left the rest of the night wide open for harassment from the performers, especially since they had an excellent table that was close to the stage.

"She" made mention to the fact that Alex was an unusually beautiful dyke and that Sam was one lucky little lady to have caught such a gem. Samantha blushed and Alex tried to look unaffected by the comment but her hand started tapping on the table and Ray reached over and brought notice to it. The announcer continued with "her" opening and ended it by beginning the song "We Are What We Are." She was joined by the entire cast, half of them dressed as female and the other half male, all donning tap shoes as they sang and danced their way through the entire song.

Samantha was enthralled. She couldn't believe men could look that good in heels and tights. "Look at the legs on that one," she would say pointing to one of the dancers. Or "Damn, I wish I had a figure like that."

The song ended and one of the torch singers was introduced followed by the club's own personal 'Barbra Streisand'. Again Samantha's eyes lit up when the personality came out on stage. "She" actually looked like Streisand and Sam was in awe as "she" did a lip sync rendition of "People."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think he was actually singing that," Samantha turned and said to Alex.

"Honey," Sonny interrupted, "Don't let any of them hear you call them a "he". You will be razzed through the rest of the evening." He smiled at his friend and she nodded in understanding.

The next act was another comedian who had to have been one of the ugliest "women" any of them had every seen. But the routine was hilarious and Samantha almost wet her pants laughing at "her", especially when she readjusted her "boobs" in the middle of the act by taking them out, fluffing them up and then putting them back into the costume.

A chorus line came on and did their rendition of "One" from the show A Chorus Line. The show seemed to fly by even with the kidding they occasionally got from one of the people up on stage. Of course they weren't the only ones being ribbed. The first announcer found another lesbian couple in the middle of the room to poke fun at and tell lesbian jokes about. One of the other performers picked on a gay male couple sitting at the table across from theirs and there was one unfortunate straight couple that became the brunt of quite a few vulgar jokes.

Between the comedians and the groups came a marvelous Judy Garland and Sonny went wild when "she" sang "The Man That Got Away". He was nearly in tears by the end of the song. But recovery came quickly as an extremely talented impersonator came out and did Diana Ross. The regulars in the audience obviously adored this performer. "She" came out dressed in a skintight shimmering blue sequined gown, singing a medley of the old Diana Ross and the Supremes songs. The best part about this act was that the impersonator was actually singing the songs and sounded very much like the real thing. When "she" did "Stop in the Name of Love" it became audience participation night and Sonny and Samantha both joined in as Alex and Ray sat back and watched with smiles on their faces, looking at each other and shaking their heads.

The show ended with a marvelous rendition of "The Best of Times" from LaCage aux folles with all the female impersonators dressed in long flowing gowns with feather boas, hats and fur

drapes. The wardrobes included every color of the rainbow which is exactly what they looked like standing up there singing, a living rainbow. Samantha was one of the first out of her seat to give a standing ovation.

Sonny's choice of shows turned out very successful and everyone left with their spirits lifted.

"Next stop - Dancing!" Sonny announced as they exited the club and climbed back into the car.

"Maybe you should ask the girls if they want to go dancing, Sonny," Ray interjected.

Sonny threw his hands in the air, "What do you mean If they want to go dancing? Of course they want to go dancing." He turned to Samantha and took her hand, "Don't you Sammie?"

"When you ask like that, who could tell you no?" Samantha answered.

"See, Ray," Sonny said looking over at his lover. "You are such a poop sometimes. Off to the dancing place!"

The small bar with the large dance floor seemed to be frequented by a very mixed group, each in their own little world. Somehow the little group managed to find an empty table back toward the exit door off the dance floor. Ray told Samantha that this had been the first club he and Sonny had danced together at, so it was one of their favorites. It didn't have a lot of atmosphere but the faceted ball in the middle of the ceiling gave the appearance of a '70s club. The music was also a mix ranging from the late 60s to early 90s and they played a good mixture of fast and slow, giving everyone something to like.

Alex danced with Samantha to the slow songs and Sonny became Sam's partner for the fast. Once or twice during the evening Ray asked Samantha to dance, once to a ballad because he didn't feel comfortable with some of the newer dances and once to a cha-cha, which he was surprised Samantha knew how to do.

The four friends found the evening speeding by and before they knew it, it was past midnight. They decided on one last dance before leaving, and as fate would have it an old Anne Murray song, "Could I Have This Dance" began to play. Alex whispered the words to Samantha. They glided across the floor as if they had been dancing partners for years instead of days. Samantha got love bumps all over her body and her eyes got misty as she listened to her lover's soft, velvety voice singing the love song in her ear.

"All right," Sonny said as Ray looked and pointed at his watch. "Last stop is over in the old Polk District. Alex, you'll remember this place."

Fifteen minutes later they were in a small after-hours establishment, sitting at a piano bar. Alex did a slight double take when they had originally passed the bar and turned around to park in the large lot adjacent to the front. She balked a little at Sonny about his final choice but gave in at the end because he insisted Samantha would love the place and Alex knew he was right.

The bar was definitely retro but Sonny loved all the old Broadway shows and had found out while they were dancing together that Samantha did, too. As they all sat around drinking and listening to the pianist and anyone else who cared to join in, Ray asked Samantha if she was going to tell her folks that she was gay. Sam almost choked on her drink and had to regain her composure before even attempting to answer the question.

"You know," she started. "I think I had put the inevitability of that confrontation out of my mind. I don't think I wanted to consider what I know has to come about." She sputtered on a little about her dad and her mom and how she felt they might take the news a little hard and then asked Sonny how he told his parents.

"Honey, you gotta be kidding!" Sonny started. "I think my parents have known since I was about 11, but they are very supportive and there for me and they both adore Ray. But now that you've joined the ranks of the Queens and the Dykes being in the closet and being with Alex definitely do not go hand-in-hand! That is one out girlfriend you've lassoed yourself with."

Alex gave him a 'shut up Sonny' look and he quickly decided to take the hint.

Samantha was too intent on asking Ray how his parents had taken the news of his being gay to see the interaction between Alex and Sonny. "I know Alex is real open, that's how I found out about her myself. But I need to hear some other people's stories to get an idea of how to approach my parents."

Ray asked Sam if she was sure she wanted to know his story. He told her it was not one with a fairy tale ending. She said yes, all tales were valid and she had no idea how hers was going to end. Ray went on to describe how his father had been informed by one of his classmates at college in his junior year that Ray was engaging in homosexual acts. His father had driven up to his dorm and asked him outright if he was "queer." Ray had been taken back by the affront but figured the best thing to do was to be honest with his father. That was definitely the wrong decision at that time in his life. His dad decked him and then told him not to get up until he left. He continued to rant that Ray was disowned and no longer welcomed home. He stopped payment on all funds to the college and Ray had to leave in the middle of the semester because he couldn't afford to stay. He had called his mom the next day, during the day, and she talked to him over the phone but was afraid to have him come to the house. She sent him a couple thousand dollars that she had stashed somewhere his father didn't know about and Ray had been on his own ever since.

He told her he still calls his mom, but only during the day when his father isn't home. He related that it's harder now to catch his mom at home alone, because his dad's retired and Ray never knows when he'll be there. Not wanting to get his mom in trouble, he doesn't call very often. The only up part of the entire story was that he gets to see his mom occasionally when she makes a trip to her sister's house in New Jersey and stays to visit for a week.

Samantha shook her head, "I hope my dad doesn't react like that, but he's more likely to go that route than the one Sonny's parent's took." She looked over at her lover who was sitting there listening to the piano player. She was going to ask Alex the same question but thought maybe it

was time to lighten up the conversation a little. "Hey, Alex," she said. "Why don't you sing something with the piano man? You have a beautiful voice."

"Yeah, Alex," Sonny said. "Why don't you sing us a song?" He turned to Samantha and added, "You know, Sweetness, Aurora is gonna love the Hell out of you! She loves to hear Alex sing and now there's someone on her side." He laughed and looked his old friend squarely in the eyes, "Come on Alex, don't be a party pooper."

Alex glared at him and shook her head no. Then she added with an unnatural sweetness to her voice, "Okay, but only if he knows a Cris Williamson song," and smiled at the rest of the little group.

"As if, Alex," Sonny huffed.

"Cris who?" Samantha asked.

"Cris Williamson -- female music -- no respectable piano player knows any of Cris' stuff unless you're in an all girl bar. It's very esoteric, gotta be in the inner sanctum to know about it. It's a Lesbian thing." Sonny continued giving Samantha an explanation. "It's Alex's way of saying, No!"

Samantha looked a little perplexed and turned to Alex, "Oh, okay, if you really don't want to, but . . . who's Aurora?"

"Aurora's my mom," Alex answered the question.

"Okay, so . . . how did she . . . take you're being gay?" Samantha queried.

Sonny about doubled over in laughter. "Alex, don't you tell this little angel of yours anything?"

Alex shot him a look that almost knocked him off the barstool. "I've only had so much time, you know. I've told her everything that seemed pertinent as we went along. I would have gotten around to mom!" She turned back to Samantha.

"What's he talking about Alex?" Samantha wanted to know.

"My mother is Aurora Dorian, the writer." Alex told her lover. "I would have told you later if big mouth hadn't made such a thing about it."

"Aurora Dorian - The Aurora Dorian? The Think and Be Who You Think You Are, Aurora Dorian?"

"The one and only," Alex smiled. "I'm proud of my mom, but I don't need to take her out of my back pocket when I first get to know someone. I would have told you soon, Samantha. The opportunity simply hadn't come up before now." Again, she shot a look of 'I'm gonna get you' over at her friend.

"By the Gods, I have her taped set on *Loving Yourself* and the one on *Changing Yourself by Changing Your Thoughts*. I absolutely adore her, but, Alex . . . isn't she . . . gay?" Samantha asked looking from one to the other of her friends.

"Yes, Samantha, my mom's gay . . ." was as much as Alex got out before Samantha went on . . .

". . . then your coming out was probably a relief rather than a surprise! How lucky for you, and I guess for your mom! That answers the question of how your parents took your being gay." Samantha then continued on as usual with a rambling of questions shot at her lover without giving her a minute between to answer them.

"Was she gay before you were born? Were you planned? Was she with anyone when she was pregnant? Did you miss not having a father? Were you one of those artificially inseminated babies? Gosh, that was a long time ago, how did they do it then? Guess you had lots of aunts? How was it growing up with a celebrity in the house?" She went to continue on when Alex put a hand to her mouth.

"Breathe, Samantha and give me a chance to respond!" Alex laughed at her excited partner. "Let me try to answer the questions you've already thrown at me: Yes. Yes. Yes. No. Kind of. Samantha!!! Yes. Interesting. The rest we can discuss at a later date -- we are having fun now, remember? This is not the time to go into my life history." She glanced over at Sonny with a slight frown.

"Oh, don't you be giving him the look, Alex. I'm glad it came out," she giggled. "Came out -- guess everything is coming out this week. Not that you kept your mom in the closet, but we haven't talked about your family, just mine. Oh, Alex, I can't wait to meet your mom and your . . . your . . . ah . . ."

"My other parent, Kelley. She's been with my mom since before I was born. That's all for now Sam, listen to the guy singing, this is a great song." Alex drew her lover closer and kissed her on the cheek then whispered in her ear, "We'll talk more later, I promise, let's enjoy the rest of the night with the guys. I get uncomfortable when the total focus of the evening turns to me, okay?"

"Okay, Alex. Later." Samantha turned her head to look into her lover's eyes. "I'm so happy. This has been a great week for me."

The four friends sat listening to one of the other patrons singing his version of "All Out of Love", an old Air Supply song and felt very blessed to be loved when so much of the world was overrun by discontent and adversity. Sonny rested his head on Ray's shoulder and was engulfed by two strong arms. Samantha did the same with Alex and they all quietly listened to the light tenor voice seemingly baring his broken heart. When he finished they all applauded and Ray had the waiter give him another of whatever it was he was drinking.

They had a final round of drinks and listened to a few other people display their talent or lack of it. Alex got away without having to sing before the entire room which made her very happy. Before they knew it two o'clock was only minutes away.

"I know you wanted to watch the sun come up, Sonny," Alex smiled over at her friend. "But you have shown us a marvelous evening and early morning, what'd ya say we call it quits. I think Samantha is about to fall asleep in my arms." She looked down and Sam was comfortably snuggled up close to her lover, her head in the crook of Alex's arm . . . she had closed her eyes during the last ballad and certainly looked peaceful. "I don't think she's used to the late hours or the drinking." Alex confessed for her lover.

"Sure, Alex," Sonny answered. "It's been a great evening. I really love your Samantha -- I think you've finally found the right one this time, girl." He smiled over at his friend and gave her a slight pat on the arm.

Alex gently rocked Samantha. "Come on, honey, we're gonna go."

"Oh . . . I think I fell asleep," Samantha mumbled as she opened her eyes and looked around at her friends. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it -- we've all been there, done that!" Ray said trying to keep Samantha from feeling too embarrassed. "I'm as exhausted as you are, only I've learned to sleep with my eyes open to keep from giving myself away." He smiled broadly at the sleepy blonde looking back at him.

"Okay, troupe," Sonny jumped off his stool and clapped his hands. "Next stop -- home!" He placed a large tip in the brandy glass on the piano and thanked the performer for a very entertaining night, then turned and followed his friends out the door.

The ride home was not very long and Samantha could not seem to thank Sonny enough for a thoroughly enjoyable and unforgettable day and evening. She raved about everything starting with breakfast and shopping and ending with dinner, the show, dancing and finally the piano bar.

"My goodness," Sonny said when he finally got a word in. "Alex maybe the next time you had better just pick her up and carry her to the car. You wake her up and it's like someone has wound her too tight while she was sleeping." He laughed and then got serious. "Samantha -- I'm . . . we're . . . glad you came up here with Alex. You are an absolute joy and we're glad you're going to be a large part of our Alex's life -- she deserves to be happy and we can see that you make her that. Welcome to the family, girl."

"So, girls," Ray interjected as they pulled up in front of the Marriott, "do you want to go to brunch around 11 and then we can take you to the airport?"

"That would be great, Ray," Alex answered. "I left the keys to the rental car at the front desk early this morning when we got in so that's all taken care of. All we have to do is pack up and we can do that before you get here, then we can leave from the restaurant."

"We got the new reservations for four in the afternoon, I believe. Is that right Sonny?" Ray asked.



"Yes, the tickets will be at the reservation desk, you just need to go pick them up. We should get you to the airport about three."

"Fine -- then we'll see you at 11," Alex finished as she and Samantha got out of the car. "Thanks for a wonderful evening."

"Yeah, thanks again from me, too," Samantha parroted.

"You are both equally welcome -- we had a great time, too. Wish you girls lived closer and we could do this more often." Sonny said with a sad smile on his face.

"See you in the a.m.," Ray concluded as Alex shut the car door and off he drove.

Once up in the room they decided to leave the packing for morning and to just get into bed. It was almost three and the both of them were exhausted -- a nice exhausted -- but exhausted nonetheless.

They undressed almost in silence with Samantha occasionally verbally reliving parts of the evening and then quieting down and thinking about it.

Alex was the first into bed and she lay there waiting for Samantha to finish brushing her teeth and messing around in the bathroom. "You coming or should I go to sleep without you?"

"Don't you dare," Samantha replied as she hopped onto the bed and snuggled up close to Alex. Alex put her arm around Samantha's shoulder and kissed her on the head, then lifted her face and kissed her goodnight. "Goodnight, honey, sleep tight."

"I will, Alex. I learned quiet a few new things about you tonight and there's still so much more to know. You are a very complex person, do you realize that?"

"Yes." Alex smiled slightly and kissed her lover on the head again.

"I had a marvelous time, but you know what?" Samantha asked.

"No, what Samantha?"

"Even though this has been a great vacation, I'm looking forward to getting back home and beginning our everyday life together. I can't believe how much my world has changed in one short week. I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do to my family, but I know you'll be there as support so I'm ready to face whatever obstacles might come my way." Samantha looked up at Alex with misty green eyes. "I love you so much, Alex. I can't begin to put into words how much."

"I love you, too, Samantha," her lover answered and wiped away a tear of joy that had run down Samantha's face. "But you don't have to wait until tomorrow or until we get home for us to begin our new life. Honey, we already started it -- this little trip was not merely for us to get to know

each other a little better -- this **was** the start of our new life. Now, close your eyes and let's get some sleep. The morning will come quicker than we can imagine."

Continued in Part 10.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 10

### Chapter 10

"Wake up sleepy head," Alex called from the living area. She'd slept unusually late and attributed it to being totally relaxed for a change. Even at that she had been up for nearly two hours and had, as silently as possible, packed almost all of their belongings. Getting no response from the bedroom she headed in that direction with a cup of tea in her hand.

She put the hot liquid down on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed, smiling at the sleeping face unaware of her presence. Gently she shook the blonde beauty to awaken her. "Come on, Samantha. Time to get up and go eat. Eat Samantha, time to eat."

"Ohhhh, no -- not now -- a little later," came the mumbled response.

"No. Not later -- now," Alex insisted as she shook the woman again. "This is your last chance."

Samantha pulled the covers up around her neck, rolled over and put her head under the pillow with a soft moan.

"Okay, can't say you weren't warned," Alex began as she got up and went into the bathroom to turn on the shower. "No more, Ms. Nice Person," she called while standing outside the shower stall as she opened the door and turned the water on. She thought about only turning on the cold but could not bring herself to be that cruel, so she turned the cold faucet on full force and then added a little of the hot. Still not receiving a response from Samantha, she marched back into the bedroom, pulled off the pillow and covers and picked Samantha up, throwing the still sleeping woman over her shoulder.

"I warned you about this yesterday. Today we have time for a watery wake up call." Alex chuckled as she carried the surprised woman she had flung over her shoulder into the bath area.

She opened the shower stall and just as Sam opened her eyes and mouth to object she was gently placed on the cool floor of the shower with luke warm water drenching her immediately.

"By the Gods, Alex!" Samantha yelled. "What are you doing???"

"I'm waking up a sleepy head that ignores me when I try to be nice," Alex answered her.

"Well," Samantha continued, standing in the shower with her hands on her hips and her nightshirt clinging to her, "I guess I'm awake now, aren't I?"

"Yeah, you look awake to me," Alex laughed at her soaked lover.

The smile on Alex's face quickly changed to a look of surprise as Samantha reached out from the enclosure and drew the taller woman in with her, pulling her close. "If I'm gonna take a shower with my clothes on -- so are you," she giggled and looked up at Alex smiling. "Good morning to you, too," she continued as she stood on her toes to give her lover a kiss.

The two women fooled around in the shower a little, after having taken off their drenched nightshirts and throwing them over in a corner of the stall. First Alex soaped up and rinsed Samantha off using her hands as soaping vehicles and making sure all areas of the lithe body under her hands were thoroughly cleaned. She, of course, had to get on her knees to get to Samantha's calves and feet, which led to some interesting sidetracking that had nothing at all to do with washing. Needless to say they were pleased that the shower stall was not the average one-person-size and there was even a small corner seat built into it which was used when knees began to buckle. Samantha's turn was next and there was not a spot on or in Alex's body that escaped soap and/or water. They laughed together as they mused in detail if the inventor of the handheld shower massage ever thought of the diverse uses of the water device. While continuing to snicker they contemplated writing the company an elaborate thank you note.

Because they spent more time playing in the water than anticipated they needed to get serious about dressing and packing when they finally got out. The two lovers were standing at the window looking out over the Bay, wrapped in each other's arms, talking quietly about all that had transpired in the last few days, when Sonny and Ray arrived at the door.

"It's open, come on in," Alex instructed their friends.

"Morning Ladies," Sonny chirped as he pounced through the door. He continued walking toward them, hands behind his back. "And are we all rested and hungry?"

"Yes, very much so," Samantha replied and Alex gave an affirmative nod. "And we're showered and ready to go," she added giving Alex a wink.

Sonny stepped a little closer and brought his hands from behind his back, "A little remembrance from your friends who live in the City by the Bay," he announced as he handed Alex a card and Samantha a box. The card was addressed to the both of them and the box was wrapped in beautifully colorful metallic rainbow paper.

Samantha looked from one to the other of the two gentlemen standing in the room, her face beginning to take on a slight rose color, "What . . . you shouldn't have . . ."

"Now, now," Sonny interrupted, "you don't even know what it is yet. Go ahead, girl. Open it," he instructed her as he gave a little waving gesture toward the box and Samantha.

Samantha carefully, so as not to tear the beautiful paper, opened the small box while a smiling Sonny looked on. Inside she found rainbow-colored tissue paper cradling a round golden plaque the size of a CD disc. As she opened the paper she immediately saw an engraved likeness of the Golden Gate Bridge with "Summer 1999" etched above it. There was also a small wooden holder to place the plaque on.

"By the Gods, Sonny and Ray," Samantha practically whispered, "this is gorgeous!"

The two men stood smiling as Samantha further examined the plaque and her eyes began to fill with tears. She moved closer to Alex so the two of them could look at the unique gift together. Below the engraving of the Bridge was the symbol of the Claddagh framed on either side by names -- on the right was written *Alex & Samantha* and on the left *Ray & Sonny*, below the symbol were three words: *Love, Loyalty, Friendship*.

Samantha could hardly contain herself as the tears began to flow. Sonny walked over and embraced his new friend. "Hey, girl. This was supposed to make those Irish eyes smile, not tear." He gently swept a falling tear from her cheek and smiled over at Alex. "We just wanted to let you know how much we appreciate your friendship."

"He had one of our friends do a rush on this the last two days," Ray explained with a nod in Sonny's direction. "Lucky for us, Lance's a very good friend and an extremely talented artisan," Ray told the girls as they continued to examine the beautiful plaque.

"I know you know what the Claddagh stands for my Irish friend," Sonny said to Sam, trying to get her to lighten up.

"Ye. . .yes," Samantha replied, regaining her composure. "The hands are the symbol of friendship, carefully holding the heart which stands for love and the crown is an emblem of loyalty. I've always loved the rings -- this is . . . I don't know what to say . . . you guys . . . this is one of the best gifts anyone has ever given me -- **us!** Actually . . . it's the *first* gift anyone has ever given **us**," she glanced at Alex who nodded in agreement. "That makes it doubly special. Thank you!"

Samantha handed the box to Alex and gave Sonny a huge hug and kiss and then walked over to Ray and gave him the same.

Sonny broke the embarrassment of everyone by asking Samantha, "Did I hear you say 'By the Gods?'"

Sam blushed a little and then explained to him that she had gotten into the habit of saying 'By the Gods' when she discovered mythology and totally engrossed herself in the subject. For some reason the words seemed to trip easily off her tongue and she tended to forget that it might sound weird to listeners. As was her custom to give more information than anyone ever asked for, she added that her dream was to some day walk the steps of the Parthenon and to visit the Temple of Athena Nike and the Island of Lesbos.

"Okay, okay." Sonny laughed, "Before you give me the complete history of Greece, I think I understand. You know, Alex always says 'Goddess', using the excuse her mother raised her saying that and now there's you and your 'Gods' -- we surely have an eccentric little group here," he laughed. "At least there's never a dull moment." He turned and looked at Ray who was looking at his watch. "So, are we ready to go eat?"

"Alex hasn't opened the card yet," Samantha said as she walked into the bathroom to rinse her face and rid it of all traces of dried tears.

"She can do that downstairs," Ray said as he picked up one of the suitcases. "I'll go bring the car around front and meet you all there." As he was walking out the door he added, "We had better get started; we're almost late for our brunch reservation and you know how Sonny feels about being late."

Alex made a double check of all the rooms, making sure they hadn't forgotten anything. Sonny picked up the small suitcase Alex had purchased for Samantha to take her souvenirs home in, leaving the larger one for Alex to get. Samantha came back out of the bathroom and grabbed her purse, that being the only thing left to take.

"All right, Let's go eat. I'm starving." Samantha linked her arm in Sonny's and Alex closed the door to the suite as the trio headed toward the elevator.

Fifteen minutes later they were all seated at a waterside table at one of San Francisco's most prestigious seafood establishments. Alex had opened the card on the way to the restaurant, and Samantha's eyes had misted up as her lover read the sentimental verse out loud. Again Sam thanked the guys for the gift and the wonderful Saturday they had all spent together, stating that San Francisco would be top on her list of most memorable cities. She made Alex promise that they would visit again in the not too distant future.

The buffet was extraordinary. Main dishes ranged from lobster, shrimp or cheese enchiladas to spaghetti and bow tie pasta with a choice of marinara, meat or alfredo sauce. There was an entire table for create-your-own omelets or eggs any way you wanted them with more fixings than Samantha had ever seen, making the choice of omelet stuffings very difficult. On one of the tables were chips with three or four different salsas, pancakes, waffles, and french toast. Of course the old standbys of toast, English muffins and hash browns were not forgotten. Meat dishes were also available for those who were still carnivores and the gals teased the guys as they piled their plates with ham, sausage and bacon. Complimentary drinks consisted of mimosas or champagne which could be substituted or accompanied by a variety of juices. Finally the pièce de résistance was the dessert table which was not lost on the small group as each of the four chose at least one portion of decadence ranging from cheesecakes, torts and fruits to cookies and soft serve ice cream.

Try as she did, even Samantha could not taste of everything, but Alex made sure to comment on the fact that she certainly tried as she asked the status of Samantha's hunger. "Are you full yet?" She smiled at her companion.

"What would you do if I said -- No?" Samantha wanted to know.

"I think I'd cart you off to the Ripley Museum to have you examined and put into one of their Believe It Or Not Books," Alex joked back.

"Well, she certainly can put it away and not have it show on her figure," Sonny chimed in. "I wish I could do that! I'll have to diet for a week after you two leave to take off the extra pounds I've gained just **watching** her eat." He laughed and gave Samantha a hug.

Ray ordered a final round of mimosas for the table then quieted everyone down as he lifted his glass and they all followed suit. "One final toast to friendship and a healthy start to a beautiful relationship for our favorite two ladies."

"Here, here," was the response from the other three friends at the table.

"Now, we really have to get started or you're going to miss your plane and have to stay another week," Ray grinned at his old and new acquaintances.

"We couldn't have that," Alex said with a smirk on her face.

Ray paid the bill and the small troupe left the restaurant.

The ride to the airport was the longest any of them had been in a car for the entire week. The four friends seemed to have talked themselves out at breakfast and were all in a semi-stupor, due to being fuller than any of them needed to be. Even Sonny seemed at a loss for words, besides commenting on how uncomfortable he was because he had eaten so much. Ray showed him no mercy and told him it was his own fault, that he knew better than to get that second waffle topped with whipped cream. Samantha just laughed and Alex added that Samantha would probably be hungry again before they got back on the ground, which landed her an elbow in the ribs and a stern look from Sam.

"What?" Alex exclaimed. "And Ouch! You know it's the truth." She smiled over at Samantha and kissed her on the cheek.

"Just because it's the truth doesn't mean you have to tell the world," the small blonde whined.

"She didn't tell the world," Sonny joined in. "She only told two of your closest friends who had already figured it out anyway, especially after watching you eat this weekend." He reached back and patted his friend on the knee, smiling.

It had been a unanimous decision to just drop the women off at the porter's station instead of parking and going with them to the gate. Alex had seen enough of Samantha's reactions lately to know that airport good-byes could be nothing but wet, sobbing affairs and she didn't want to drag out the departure and get everyone upset after such a lovely morning.

"You know, these past few days have been the most fun we've had with Alex in years," Ray said as he pulled the car into the curb to drop his friends off. "I don't remember the last time, before this weekend that I've seen her smile a genuine smile," he looked over at his old friend. "I believe the two of you are on the brink of a wonderful life together. I'm reminded of Sonny and me when we first got together and it brings back many marvelous memories. I feel honored that we were able to share in this part of your lives." He finished his little speech, opened the car door and got out.

"Damn, Ray," Sonny stared after his partner in disbelief. "I think that's more than you've said at one time in weeks!" He looked around at the girls as he opened his own door to get out. "Go figure," he continued shaking his head. "But -- he's absolutely right and I feel the same way." Sonny nodded in the direction of his lover as he added, "Guess we'd better help old gabby Ray there get your stuff."

Ray had already walked around to the back of the car, opened the trunk and pulled out the two big bags. He was halfway to the porter podium before everyone else was out of the car. Alex walked over to fill out the luggage forms, and Sonny got the last of the baggage as he and Samantha started their farewell to each other. They were like two little kids, one of whom was leaving and moving away from the neighborhood. They must have been friends in another lifetime, Alex thought to herself as she pondered how quickly they had become close. Now I know San Francisco will receive at least a yearly visit from us, she smiled knowing that she loved to visit the city and now would have a very good reason to make repeated trips. There was still a lot for Samantha to see and Alex had every intention of showing her every bit of it.

All the baggage was labeled and thrown onto the moving belts leading to the plane. Alex gave the porter his tip and turned around prepared to say good-bye to her old friends. One look at Sonny and she knew it was not going to be an easy good-bye; he was already starting to get misty-eyed. "Why all the sad looks?" she asked, glancing at each one of the faces staring at her. "Alternative Paradise will be opening in less than two weeks now and you two will definitely be coming up to the open house, right? You promised!" She smiled at the guys and then at Sam. "So, you see -- no need for tears! Now let's just do this quickly and we'll be in touch with you within the week."

"Within the week?" Sonny screeched. "You had best give us a call when you get home. We want to make sure you're safe and I won't sleep a wink until I know. You got that?" He smiled at Alex as he threw his arms around Samantha. "Well, now little one, I guess we'll be visiting in less than two weeks like Alex said. You keep her in line, ya hear? Don't let her go back to being all work, it sure made for a dull Alex."

"I will Sonny, I promise," Samantha told him, holding back a snuffle. "I'll be looking forward to the opening of the clinic even more now that I know you guys will be coming up." She gave him a kiss and then she and Alex switched friends.

Samantha said her good-bye to Ray and Alex did the same to Sonny, promising to call as soon as they got home. Then she told the guys to go on and leave and scooted them on their way. She and Samantha turned and entered the building with Samantha taking one last look around as they got on the escalator, waving at Sonny who had also turned around to watch his friends leave.

"They sure are nice people," Samantha told Alex as she turned back around and grabbed Alex's hand.

"Yes, Samantha they're very nice people. I intend to see to it that we keep in touch with them." She smiled at the small woman standing beside her and then glanced down at her watch. Their mini-vacation was over but she was glad to be going back down to Laguna. Actually, she was looking forward to having Samantha all to herself for a little while. There was still a lot of getting to know each other to be done and plans for their immediate future to be made.

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The trip back home was uneventful. Samantha had fallen asleep on the plane. After crying on-and-off throughout the entire morning, even though most of the tears were happy ones, she found herself to be extremely tired and the flight very conducive to a short nap. Alex leafed through the airline magazine and listened to music. During the car ride home they chatted about all they did in San Francisco and Samantha again thanked Alex for asking her to go with her. Alex thanked Samantha for going and the mutual admiration conversation went in a circle until they both started laughing from the silliness of it. Within an hour of landing they were pulling into the garage back at the clinic.



"Why don't we go on upstairs and I'll call for a pizza," Alex suggested as they got out of the car. "We haven't had any real junk food for a couple days, I don't feel like cooking and really don't want to go out to eat. How 'bout you?"

"Hey, pizza is always tops on my list of favorite foods," Samantha agreed. "But don't forget to call the boys first!" she added with a wink, "You don't want Sonny calling here in the wee hours of the morning because you forgot and he couldn't sleep," she said smiling. "And . . . how'd ya know I was getting hungry?" She looked over at Alex and winked then walked around to the back of the car to help her lover get the bags out. "We can just throw my stuff in the VW now so we don't have to take it back upstairs," she offered.

Alex gave her a strange look but took Samantha's two suitcases out and placed them in the back seat of the Volkswagen, then went back to get her suitcase out of the trunk.

"I could've helped with one of those, you know," Samantha told her.

"I know, but they weren't that heavy and it was easier just to do it myself. Come on, let's go on upstairs." Alex put her arm around the smaller woman's shoulder as they left the garage and entered the warehouse.

"It was a good mini-vacation in San Francisco, and I had a great time, but you know, Samantha - I'm glad we're home," Alex hugged her lover close as they walked through the building and over to the elevator. Home, she thought to herself, *Now I can really concentrate on making this home. A home for me and a home for Samantha. All I have to do is convince her that she should call this place home, too.*

As Alex put the key in the elevator slot the two women were each lost in their own thoughts. Alex held Samantha close to her, her arms around the shorter woman's shoulders, the small blonde leaning with her back against her lover's chest. The short ride up was a silent one.

Alex had said "we're home" and that had started Samantha thinking. *Home Samantha, did you hear her say Home? I would love to make this my home, too, but I don't want to seem like I'm rushing her. I don't even know if I should stay or go back to my apartment tonight. It sure will be lonely without Alex to cuddle up with. I'm already spoiled, being in bed without her next to me will be torturous. It seems in some ways like we've been together forever.*

The elevator reached its destination and the two women walked in silence through the kitchen to the living room area. Alex dialed the pizza house and ordered pizza and two salads then dialed San Francisco and spoke to Sonny. She only talked long enough to tell him that all was well, the flight was uneventful and that they would be in touch about the date for the open house. She hung up the phone and went over to the window to join Samantha.

"You know, Alex, as beautiful as it was in San Francisco -- the view from here is still better. Maybe I feel this way because here is where our love began," Samantha confessed, as she turned and put her arms around Alex's waist looking up into eyes she could lose her soul in. "I feel so . . .

. at home . . . here with you," she admitted as Alex bent slightly forward and passionately kissed her on the lips.

"You'd better feel at home here, honey," Alex whispered. "Because we're going to be here for a long, long time and I don't intend on letting you go. Wanna go for a swim after dinner? We haven't been in the water for days."

"Sounds great -- did I leave my suit here the last time we went swimming?" She gave Alex a puzzled look. "I don't think so," she concluded.

"You don't need a suit," Alex smiled at her, "Look out there, the beach is empty. We'll go down in tee-shirts and play it by ear. Au natural! Feel adventurous?" Alex grinned at her lover and gave her a wink.

"Sure, I'm game . . . I think," came the reply as she unintentionally began to blush.

Alex poured them each a glass of wine. "Here, this will give you a reason to have rosy cheeks," she laughed as she handed Samantha a goblet. They sat and watched the water and talked a little about each of their families while they waited for the pizza to arrive. It wasn't a very long wait as the buzzer sounded in less than 45 minutes, and Alex went down to retrieve their meal. Neither one of them had realized how hungry they had been, but between the two of them they ended up eating almost the entire pizza, plus their salads. Alex started to pour another round of wine when Samantha stopped her.

"If we're going swimming in a little while, I think we should hold off on that, don't you?" she questioned the raven-haired beauty.

"Yes, I think you may be right. Let's give ourselves a half hour to let our food get well on the way to being digested and then we'll start down," Alex agreed.

"So . . ." Alex started. Because she had to start sometime and now was as good a time as any while they were just sitting around waiting. "We seemed to make a pretty good team up there in the big city, don't you think?" She looked at Samantha who was sporting a puzzled look.

"Good team? Yeah, I guess you could call us a team." Samantha looked at Alex oddly. "Although, I don't know that team would actually be the term I would use for us." *What does she mean, Team? Samantha wondered. Partners, lovers, more than friends -- but a Team?*

"I don't think you understand where I'm coming from," Alex continued seeing the look of utter confusion on Samantha's face ". . . I meant when we were working together at the gym with the guys. You know, you with the typing and computer and me doing the physical stuff and getting them set up and . . . all that," Alex clarified.

"Oh -- that kind of team," Samantha breathed a sigh of understanding. "Now I see what you mean. Uh, huh. Yeah. We did make quite a team. Everything got done in a timely manner and no disagreements while in the process. Team-work -- we seem to do well with it." She smiled over

at her lover, finally realizing that she was not talking about their personal relationship but a business one.

Samantha had glanced out the windows and couldn't help changing the subject for a split second. "Oh, Alex, look!" She pointed out the window toward the ocean. "Dolphins at sunset -- what a welcome home present. The Golden Gate Bridge looked beautiful at sunset but this . . . this is so . . . unobstructed . . . so uncivilized looking . . . and now the dolphins!"

Alex stepped behind her so they could both view the living portrait and held her close as they watched the family of dolphins make their way down the coast line. She kissed Samantha on her head, taking in the sweet fragrance that had become an aphrodisiac to her and then made a statement that came from her heart before it ever had a chance to register in her head. "Samantha, will you make this your home?" She whispered.

Samantha slowly turned around to face her lover, "This -- my home?" She looked into intent blue eyes. "Do you mean right Here? Are you asking me to move in with you, Alex?"

"Samantha, I want to share everything with you and I don't want to wait for the right time. I want the right time to be now. No one knows what tomorrow will bring and I don't want to miss a minute of you, a second of you. I don't want to sleep without you in my bed. I don't want to wake up in the morning without your face being the first thing I see," was Alex's answer, then she smiled realizing that perhaps she had not exactly answered the question. She stared into the glistening green eyes staring back at her, "Yes. Samantha, I'm asking you to move in with me and to share my life, starting right this minute!"

"Oh, Alex . . . are you sure? This is such a big move, for both of us," the smaller woman stated.

Alex's heart dropped into her stomach as she felt that maybe she had read everything that had happened in the past few days incorrectly. Maybe Samantha loved her but not enough to change her entire life and move in with her. Maybe she was assuming too much. She inhaled deeply and sighed. "Samantha, I don't want you to feel obligated to do anything. I'm sorry if . . . I'm rushing the situation. Forget it."

She lifted her head to look out upon the water, not wanting Samantha see the tears that were forming pools in her eyes. Silence enveloped the room because there was a lump forming in her throat that would have given her emotions away had she tried to speak.

Small hands reached up to Alex's face and brought it back down to once again lock eyes. "My darling, Alex," she began, "I would love nothing more than to move in here with you and share your life. It's just that I feel I have nothing to offer in comparison to all that you offer me. I don't ever want to be without you, Alex. I just want to be worthy . . ."

The rest of her sentence was cut off by lips that covered hers as Alex kissed her and held her close. "What you offer me, my Destiny, cannot be measured in material gains," the dark-haired beauty whispered into her lover's ear. "You've just made me the happiest woman in the world. And now we are both truly home."

The two women stood there in each other's embrace contemplating the commitment they had just made to one another. Both feeling quite content with their decision.

"So, shall we go consummate this decision with a ritual of water?" Alex asked after a few minutes, a sheepish grin spreading across her face.

"Why not, always a first time for everything!" Samantha giggled at the thought of a watery celebration.

"Okay, here's the deal, we just put on nightshirts -- nothing else -- and," she looked down on the beach and saw that it was still deserted, "when we get down there we'll just leave the shirts and towels on the blanket and go in. From there we cross our fingers that no one else decides to go beach walking on our little strand."

"And if they do?" Samantha questioned.

"We'll just stay in the water until they leave or I'll tell them they're on a private beach and to keep on moving." Alex informed her lover.

"Is it a private beach, Alex?" Samantha asked.

"It's on its way to being one," Alex smiled at the blonde, "I started the process about three months ago and was promised the signs by next week. I sure am glad they didn't come early, though. We might never have met. "

"Me, too." Samantha stated as she followed Alex into the bedroom to change.

"As soon as the signs arrive we can put up fencing to block off the area in front of the clinic. Then we won't have to worry about other people," Alex finished explaining as they changed into nightshirts and gathered up towels.

Ten minutes later the lovers found themselves on the still deserted beach. Alex had turned on the light that illuminated down to the sand enough for them to see, casting shadows over the dunes. There was only a sliver of a moon out and the stars were dulled by the presence of some wispy clouds. Enough light was available to see where they were going and to see each other, that was all they were concerned with. Alex made a mental note to add a cabana as soon as possible, a wooden patio off the sand and a platform with a shower. She even put in the back of her mind a small pier extending out across a short distance of the water. They laid their towels down on the blanket Alex had grabbed out of the bedroom closet and looking around, dispensed of their shirts.

The breeze from the water hit the bare skin of the lover's, creating instant goose bumps all over their bodies. Alex couldn't keep her hands off the vision before her. She ran her fingers down the contour of Samantha's body and then pulled her close. "By the Goddess, you are beautiful," she whispered in Samantha's ear.

"Back at ya," Samantha replied, giving Alex a peck on the cheek and pushing away from her. "We're going in the water, remember? Last one in gets to do dinner dishes for a week," Samantha yelled as she gave herself a huge head start, running toward the ocean.

Her lead was not enough, even though she was more than half way to the water by the time Alex started. In seconds Alex had caught up with the small blonde, swept her up from behind, grabbing her back and under the knees as she continued toward the ocean. She kept running, carrying a flailing Samantha who was trying to get down from the stronger woman's grasp, to no avail.

"No, Alex," Samantha screamed. "Don't . . . let me get in a little at a time . . . it's cold . . . don . . ."

Splash, she was flung out and landed in the water while a smiling Alex now stood a few feet from her, barely wet to the waist.

"And that, my darling, is what happens when you try to beat me," Alex laughed as her lover came gurgling up out of the ocean.

"I'll get you for that," Samantha warned. "Just you wait -- when you least expect it -- I'll get ya. And the dishes for a week -- that's off -- you cheated!"

"Do your best, little one," Alex responded as she dove into the water beside Samantha. "Come on, let's swim."

They swam for a while until Samantha, not being as good a swimmer, began to get a little out of breath. She turned on her back and began floating. Alex caught the movement out of the corner of her eye and stopped swimming. She stood up, chest deep in the ocean beside her lover, watching as Samantha's body rose above the water, her firm breasts glistening in the trickle of light from the moon. In Alex's eyes she was a silhouette of beauty on the ocean. She reached out and touched the floating vision, feeling the nipples respond to her tender caress. As she placed her other hand under Samantha's back, she drew her close enough to be able to lean over and cover one of the nipples with her mouth. The combination of soft skin and water was erotic and Alex explored the buoyant body before her. Her hand slowly traveled from the breast down to the stomach, and finally to the curly mound that was partially covered with the sea. She heard Samantha moan above the sound of the waves as she continued touching the smaller woman, drawing her even closer. Samantha threw her arms around Alex's neck, showering her with kisses and acclamations of love as the two continued to drift along the shoreline intertwined.

Occasionally a wave would push them closer to the shore and finally they decided to ride the waves in. When they reached the area where Samantha could comfortably stand, she did and she had somehow gotten in front of Alex. As Alex came up from body surfing she was greeted unexpectedly by splashes. Samantha had caught her off guard and then began running in the knee-deep tide toward the sand. She should have known better than to think she could outrun Alex -- anywhere -- but it was worth a try. Long legs, leaping through the ankle-deep water, went

a lot faster than knee-deep legs and Alex caught up with her lover, grabbed her and swung her around, having her feet clip the waves as they broke along the shoreline.

Still holding Samantha up she asked whether Sam wanted to go for another dunk.

"Put me down," shouted the small blonde, trying her best to look annoyed.

Alex feigned throwing her back into the ocean but instead continued to carry her until they were almost on the dry sand where she gently put her down and drew her close for a delicate embrace. Samantha, her arms now around Alex's waist stood on her toes to kiss her lover, then began moving her hands slowly down Alex's back to her firm, muscular buttocks, gently squeezing as she felt the natural curves on either side.

Alex nibbled on her ear and mumbled that she had better stop teasing if she knew what was good for her.

"Who said anything about teasing?" Samantha answered. "Turn about's fair play. What do you think you did to me in the water?" She brought one hand around the front of Alex's body and in between her legs, playing with the soft curly hair that hid her lover's soft, wet folds.

Alex could feel her knees beginning to buckle and grabbed Samantha's hand.

"No, you don't, Samantha." Alex scolded, removing the hand that continued to play with the soft curls.

Samantha pulled her hand out from under Alex's. "You just let my fingers be, Alex Dorian. I'm not ready to go upstairs yet."

"Can we at least get on the blanket?" Alex smiled at the small blonde, looking around to make sure they were still the only people on the beach.

"Yeah, that might be a good idea, keep us from getting sand in certain areas that would best be without it," Sam laughed as she pulled Alex by the hand and ran toward the blanket. "Hurry, I don't want to lose the mood."

"No chance of that!" Alex stated, reversing their positions as she got in front of the smaller woman and ended up reaching the blanket first. She stopped at the edge and went down on her knees with Samantha directly behind her. Sam put both her arms around Alex's neck and kissed her on the top of the head as the taller woman had done to her so many times before. She continued leaning on Alex's back slowly pushing her forward, first onto her hands and then down onto her stomach. Of course Alex gave no resistance, letting Samantha think it was all her doing. The smaller woman's pseudo-victory arrived when Alex was down on the blanket with Samantha was lying on top of her.

Samantha showered Alex's neck and ears with soft kisses, her tongue tracing the curves of her lover's ear and then gently sucking on the soft lobe. She continued kissing her way down Alex's

back tasting the mingling of Alex's own sweetness with the salt of the ocean. The mixture excited the passion of a new experience in the small blonde as her lips kissed the round muscular butt of her companion. She spread Alex's legs and placed her hand between them, feeling all the muscles of the taller woman's body tense at the anticipation.

"Not yet, my love," Samantha cooed to her partner. "Turn over and let me look into those eyes of yours -- my windows to your soul."

Alex did as she was bidden and saw Samantha had gotten on her knees, giving the larger woman an advantage -- she caught Samantha off balance, landing her flat on her back.

"Gotcha now," Alex smiled as she switched positions with the blonde and was now lying on top of her, holding her arms up over her head with one hand. She passionately leaned forward planting kisses all over Samantha's face and lips and traveling down to the flat stomach. Without letting go of the smaller woman's hands she ran her other hand down to the blonde mound of curls and gently played in the soft hair. She then teased and tormented her lover by playing gently over the areas of pleasure that begged to be stimulated to a greater degree. Each time Samantha would let out an exclamation of pleasure, Alex would smile, knowing that the enjoyment was two-fold. When she felt Samantha could take the taunting no longer she passionately entered her and consummated their ritual of love.

The crashing of the waves drown out the outcries of love coming from Sam as Alex drove her to a final climax. Alex smiled with satisfaction as she lay beside her lover, holding her close enough to feel the beating of her heart.

"I love you, baby," Alex purred as she kissed Samantha on the cheek, "I love making love to you."

"I love you, too, Alex," came a breathless response. "You make me feel like I've never felt before and each time it gets better." Samantha smiled at her lover and snuggled closer.

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Off in the distance beyond sight yet with the capability of seeing stood a solitary figure who had just spent the best part of an hour glaring angrily through binoculars and was now viciously tearing at a photograph that had been developed earlier in the morning. "Just you wait! I'm not done with you yet!" came the growling comment that was audible only to the speaker.

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The two lovers on the beach were oblivious to the fact that they had been observed. The wind was beginning to chill slightly and they decided to go back up to the house and into a warm jacuzzi to conclude the evening's festivities. They pulled on their shirts, folded up the blanket and gathered the towels before making their way back toward the cliff.

Halfway up the stairs they stopped on the platform and looked back out over the water, listening to the roar as the waves crashed upon the shoreline.

Alex cradled Samantha in her arms while Sam leaned back against her lover for support. "The sound of the ocean is so enchanting," Alex murmured into Samantha's ear.

"It is a soothing sound, isn't it?" Samantha agreed. "Now it will always sound like home to me," she continued as the ocean once again brought out the romantic in her. "I hope the passion we feel for each other lasts for a lifetime, Alex." Samantha turned and looked into two dark pools, unable to completely see the love that was emanating from them. "I don't know about you but I have made love and been made love to in the past week more than I have in . . . forever! I almost feel like . . . I don't know . . . it just isn't something I'm used to, but I can't seem to . . ."

"Hush, Samantha," Alex laughed at her lover. "Actually, it's been a very long time since I've made love to anyone or had anyone made love to me, too. But with you, I can't seem to help myself and you know what --- I don't want to. I think we're in the proverbial sheet-burn stage." She looked at her lover, smiled and then tightened her grip on her.

"Some passions never die, my love, they'll just eventually take a gentler form. I've watched my parents for years and have always envied them their passion for each other. They've been together almost 33 years and they still steal kisses in the kitchen, whisper into each other's ears and hold hands in the movies or while riding in the car. I hope we're as happy as they are after we've spent that much time together." Alex looked down at Samantha, trying to imagine not wanting to kiss or touch her every time she laid eyes on her. *It will be a long time before this passion turns cool, my love,* she confessed in thought.

"I can't wait to meet your parents, Alex," Samantha told her companion with enthusiasm. She then lowered her eyes and her voice as she confessed, "I'm not in as much of a hurry for you to meet mine. I know they'll love you at first, but . . . after they find out about our relationship . . . I'm not sure how the tide will turn."

Alex lifted her lover's face to once again look into now misty emerald eyes. "How are you going to tell them, Honey? Do you want me to be there with you for support?" Alex questioned, getting very concerned that Samantha might be putting herself in harm's way when she told her parents.

"I'm not sure yet, Alex. But they will be down for the Pageant of the Masters so I'd better start thinking about it, or rather I should say we should start talking about it so I have some idea how to deal with the situation. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about what their reaction might be."

"At least we have a little bit of time to plan," Alex countered. "Maybe my Mom can give us some clues - it's not the same situation but she's still a parent and she is pretty good with people." She gave Samantha a hug and then suggested that they go on up to the house. "We can talk about it more after we get to the house or in the morning after we've thought about it for a while."



"Sounds like a good idea," Samantha agreed. As they neared the front doors she remembered about the symbols. "You still need to tell me about all of these," Samantha reminded Alex as they approached the stained glass.

"I will, give us a little time to get some of the really important things out of the way first -- like getting you moved in." Alex opened the door, waited for Samantha to get in and then closed and locked the door behind her. She had an unsettling feeling as she was closing the doors and let her eyes search the area in front of the building. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, she shook off the feeling as being silly and turned back around to Samantha.

"You know, we didn't even check to see if the pool and Jacuzzi areas got finished while we were gone. Mind taking a little tour to see what was done in our absence?" Alex asked putting her arm around Samantha.

"Not at all -- lead the way," was the response.

They stopped by the supervisor's desk and checked on the notes that had been left in Alex's box. She read that the pool and the two Jacuzzi tubs had all been filled and the chemicals all checked out. The gym equipment had been finished being delivered and had been placed in the areas she had designated. The track upstairs was to be finished in the morning as was the guard rail that surrounded it.

"That's all I need to know for tonight." She turned back to Samantha after putting the paperwork back on the desk. "Let's go check out the pools." There was no need to turn on the lights, she knew the way by heart. She grabbed Samantha's hand and led her toward the pool area.

"Very impressive," Samantha stated as they walked around the perimeter of the pool.

Alex walked over and turned on the lights that just lit inside the pool yet gave plenty of illumination to the room, especially since the room was mostly glass. She walked over to Samantha who was staring inside the pool. Alex had commissioned a local artist to paint the sides and bottom with creatures of the sea.

"Look at the dolphins -- they look real from here Alex! What a wonderful idea. And there -- is that a manatee?" She bent slightly forward to get a better look.

"Yeah, why keep to the animals of this area only? A bit of variety is good," Alex answered as she came closer to her companion. "Look down there -- you'll see seals, blow fish, otters and even stingrays." She pointed a small distance from the region Samantha was looking at and when Samantha moved her head to follow Alex's hand, Alex pushed her in.

"Oops!" she laughed. "Did you want to swim with the creatures tonight?"

"Why, you!" Samantha yelled from the middle of the pool. "Do you want me to sleep in the water tonight? First the ocean and now this! Get your butt in here with me, or do I have to come out and get you?"

"I don't need to be told twice," Alex answered as she took off her shirt and dove in, coming up beside the smaller woman. She reached out and pulled Samantha's sopping shirt over her head, wrung it out and threw it to the side of the pool then grabbed her lover and kissed her. "You are just too sexy when you're wet!" She drew Samantha closer and traced the smaller woman's body with her hands. "That's not to say you're not sexy when you're dry, but wet is very nice!" They swam around looking at all the sea creatures, Samantha marveling at how realistic they were.

"Okay, we christened this pool, let's get out and go check out the Jacuzzi." Alex prompted.

"I'd say I'd race ya, but every time I've tried so far has ended up disastrous for me," Samantha laughed. "So, you lead and I'll follow."

Like a couple of kids who had been locked in the school gym after hours, they first got into the men's Jacuzzi and then tried out the women's. Alex turned on the sauna before they went into the first pool and by the time they were finished the sauna was steaming. It checked out to be working perfectly, even though the dry heat was not Alex's favorite. The finishing touch of the evening was the shower stalls where they used the sample shampoo and conditioner on their hair before drying off and heading back upstairs.

Alex tried to tempt Samantha into breaking in the mat on the gym floor, but Samantha insisted that it was time they go up to the apartment. She gave the excuse that she was thirsty but what she really wanted was to get Alex up to the waterbed; she had plans for the rest of the evening. Love on the beach was exciting but she wanted to finalize the night by making love to Alex in the soft, comfortable bed. She had never been sexually turned on by anyone before, and now she could not get enough of touching the woman she had fallen in love with or enough of having Alex touch her.

In her mind she put together a scenario where they could spend an entire week locked up in the house, only taking time out to eat, go the bathroom and occasionally sleep. She figured that after a week like that they would at least be able to carry on a more normal relationship without having to touch each other each time they were in reaching distance. Then she reconsidered -- maybe she should make it a month!

Now she knew how all her girlfriends felt in high school when they had crushes on boys. Samantha didn't want to be anywhere that Alex wasn't and she wanted to be in physical contact with her at all times.

At any rate, Samantha, got her way and the two ended up back in the apartment. Sam went and piled up the pillows for them to lean against and Alex poured them a glass of wine. They sat, still unclothed, in front of the windows looking out over the ocean with Alex's arms wrapped tightly around Sam, breathing in her fragrance. The business woman in Alex began talking about work, but Samantha kept interrupting her by turning around and kissing on her neck or tickling her until she finally gave up and told Samantha that they really needed to have a serious conversation in the morning. Samantha agreed, but admitted she did not want to have it tonight. Alex condescended and shelved the discussion as they finished their wine. Samantha then lured her lover into the bedroom.

Sam was quite determined that the rest of the evening would go her way and when she put her mind to things, she usually won. The conversation died as the seduction in the bedroom began. The small blonde found new methods of teasing before delivering what she promised, but deliver she most certainly did. As a newcomer to being in love, she was a quick study and Alex was delighted at being on the receiving end of all those pent up emotions.

The night was turning into morning as the two women lay wrapped in each other's arms. There was a lot that needed to be accomplished in the next couple days. The Clinic needed finalization so they could open the doors the following week. Physical therapists, massage therapists and all the instructors who had already been assigned positions in the Clinic needed to be contacted and told exactly when they could begin. The dates had been tentatively made months ago and now confirmation calls were in order.

Alex had in mind just the right person to help organize all that was left to do, in fact, that person was at this moment falling asleep in her arms. All Alex needed to do was to persuade Samantha that working together would be as wonderful an experience as loving and living together was going to be. She was sure she wouldn't have any problems convincing Sam, the trick was to slow her down long enough to listen to what Alex had planned.

Samantha stirred slightly and tightened her hold around Alex's waist, "I love you, Alex," came the whispered confession from the half-asleep woman.

Alex was glad to be home and glad that Samantha was in her life to stay. The Clinic, the parents and what to do with Sam's apartment were important but not so much as her having Sam within speaking distance at all times. She tightened her hold on the small blonde and gently stroked her hair as she kissed her goodnight.

"I love you, too, baby," Alex softly replied in a hushed tone. Tomorrow was going to be a very busy day. She again thanked the Goddess for letting the vivacious imp in her arms become part of her world as she, also, closed her eyes and slept.

Continued in Part 11.

**The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive**

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~ Laguna Nights ~  
by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go

any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 11

### Chapter 11

The west side of the building never got the morning sun, but Alex's body instinctively knew it was time to get up. She lay in bed contemplating what the day was to bring and realized that she really didn't have the luxury today of just laying here with Sam while the smaller woman slept. She knew from the past few days that Samantha was not a light sleeper and she hardly stirred as Alex carefully slipped out from under her hold. It was weird sleeping in one position all night attached to another warm body, but it was a weird Alex was thoroughly enjoying. She was ready to begin her life as a partner and prayed to the Goddess that this time the relationship would last for a lifetime. She blew the sleeping woman a kiss and whispered, "I love to watch you sleep, Honey." Then tiptoed out of the bedroom and into the bathroom, softly closing the door behind her.

Alex stared in the mirror as she brushed her teeth, mentally going over some of the chores that needed to be completed before the end of the day and trying to get them straight in her mind before putting them down on paper as was her custom.

First on the list was to finish looking over everything that had been accomplished in her absence, talk to the supervisors and then see what was left on their agendas. Aside from the track and railing, only small stuff should be left to complete. She breathed a sigh of relief in realizing that the open house was merely days away. Reconsidering the relief, she switched back to the semi-panic mode because she hadn't thought about all that having an open house entailed. San Francisco had completely taken her mind off the opening and being with Samantha had taken precedence over everything. It was very unlike Alex to put anything ahead of business, but she was realizing that her life was changing in more ways than she had originally imagined.

Quickly going over all that needed to be done in respect to the opening, she assured herself that handling the preparation would be one of Samantha's assignments. She seemed to be very good at organizing, she loved to cook and she loved to talk. So, getting the menu together would be an

easy task for her. She could also call all the subcontractors and set them up with starting dates. Alex was sure her lover would be able to keep everything under control, which would leave Alex free to supervise the finishing of the work.

She smiled at the face in the mirror when she thought about the plan she had for Samantha to come on board with her instead of doing that transcribing job. Having Sam in the clinic would give her a chance to see the blonde on-and-off throughout the day and the thought of that was exceedingly pleasing. In exchange for taking Sam away, Alex would make sure Jane's company was well compensated.

Sometime this morning she and Samantha needed to have that talk about business. But right now she needed to get a cup of tea. Then she'd shower and dress. The workers would be arriving in less than two hours and she wanted to be downstairs before anyone else arrived and completely filled in on what had transpired over the last few days.

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Light was filtering in from the skylight and around the open window areas of the Clinic as Alex made her way down, tea in hand. She unlocked the front doors and then walked over to the supervisor's desk and collected all her messages. Her office was on the same floor so she headed toward it.

She had forgotten to show Sam the office on the tour; actually there were still quite a few places in the building Samantha had never been. That would be rectified very soon -- mental note made -- *Acquaint Samantha with the entire building ASAP*. She unlocked the door and stepped into her private domain. The office was positioned in the northwest corner on the bottom floor, giving her an ocean view out two sides. Light wood paneling covered the left wall with built in bookcases only partially filled (the rest of the books were still in boxes on the third floor). Between the bookcases was a one-way viewing window so she could look out to the gym, if she so desired, but would not be disturbed by onlookers from the other side. She had painstakingly picked out a large, light oak desk to match the paneling, which would be delivered before the end of the week and would hold her computer, monitor, and tele/fax machine with a space below for the printer. There were also a few chairs, excluding her own and a couple oak file cabinets. The dictaphone machine would also fit somewhere on or under the desk but she hadn't picked out a place for it as yet. She made herself a note to remember to get another machine for one of the other office rooms.

Alex sat down on the floor with her messages in one hand, pad and pen in the other. She began by making a list:

Talk to Samantha about coming onboard in a working capacity.

Talk to Samantha about the parent situation.

Talk to Samantha about finishing the suite so her parents will have a place to stay.

Call Mom about Sam's parents.

*So far all my notes are about Sam -- they should be about the Clinic. Come on, Alex, get your mind on the job at hand -- you and Samantha will have all night to talk -- just get through the day. Okay, okay. She chastised herself and started another list:*

Check with the supervisors about what needs to be finished.

Check and make sure the alarm system is up and running properly now.

Get word to all the contract therapists, massage people, lecturers and instructors.

Talk to Samantha about the Open House.

Talk to Samantha about getting a moving company to get her stuff.

*Enough already -- no more notes until you Talk to Samantha. Obviously this is not going the way you expected.*

Her little talk with herself was interrupted by the sound of workers entering the building. Getting to her feet she recognized the head supervisor and walked over to talk to him.

"So, it seems by your notes that things are finishing up on time," Alex greeted the supervisor.

"Yes, Ms. Dorian," the supervisor began. "We only have half a crew today because most of what you had specified got finished up Saturday. Most of the work that's left to do is on the second floor. Basically the area around the track and the rail." His smile was one of pride as he continued to explain to his employer how everything was being handled.

Alex agreed that it seemed as though all was running smoothly. "The Clinic is really shaping up and it looks like you've pretty much completed the list I left with you. I'm very pleased with the way you handled everything in my absence." She watched as the supervisor beamed in response to the compliment from a woman he deemed could be difficult to please. "I already checked out the Jacuzzi in each of the locker areas and the pool. Also, it looks like all the equipment was put in the gym according to my specifications. You've done an excellent job, Jim." Alex complimented the older man. "How long do you think it will take the crew to finish on the second floor?"

"I would imagine we'll be totally finished by Wednesday, Ms. Dorian," came the reply.

"Good. Then I guess I can start making plans for the Open House. I'll wait until everything checks out, especially the railing, and then set the date." She shook the supervisor's hand. "Listen, I'm expecting my office furniture as well as the furniture for a few of the other offices to arrive between now and Thursday. If I'm not around when it does, I would appreciate your handling the placement of the pieces. I'll leave you a note as to where each piece is supposed to go." She looked at the older man as he nodded an agreement and then turned to go upstairs to oversee the workers.

Alex walked over to the Juice Bar area to check out the boxes that had arrived on Thursday and were all sitting in the corner. She had a slew of products to have unpacked along with the new equipment for chopping, juicing and blending. The person in charge of this area needed to be called today -- she scribbled another note.

*Okay. That seems to be all that needs to be done down here right now. Guess I'll go have a look at the second floor.*

She wandered around the second floor and was very pleased with the rate of completion. Everything was going according to schedule and all that needed to be done now was to plan the opening. The sun was beginning to stream in through the windows and Alex heard and felt her stomach beginning to rumble.

*That's what I deserve for not at least grabbing a bagel before I left the apartment, she reprimanded herself. Well, it wasn't too late to rectify the situation. It was time anyway to take a break and wake the sleepyhead up. She and Sam could go get some breakfast and while they ate she would finally get a chance to talk to her lover about Samantha coming to work with her.*

The elevator door opened and Alex was struck by the distinct smell of breakfast strips. *Well, I guess getting Samantha up is no longer on the list.* She quietly opened the door and walked into the kitchen. The radio was blaring and the small blonde at the counter was obviously enjoying

her music and oblivious to the new presence in the room. Alex stepped up behind the singing cook and put her arms around Samantha's waist. The smaller woman jumped and almost matched heights with her lover before turning around giggling.

"Damn, Alex -- you could have made me burn myself," she half-seriously told her lover as she threw her arms around Alex's neck and kissed her good morning.

"No, no, no," Alex shook her head. "I saw what you were doing before I came in. I was careful about that -- wouldn't do to have you hurting yourself. Breakfast smells wonderful! I'm starving."

"Hey, isn't that my line," the smaller woman asked. "Well, it's just about ready. I was hoping I wouldn't have to try to figure out the intercom or the phone intercom or go down and get you. Must be ESP -- you're right on time. Go! Sit down. Your juice and tea are already on the table. You need to explain all the nuances of the intercom systems to me sometime Before I need to use it."

"Most definitely!" Alex stated as she gave Sam a hug. "This is a great way to start the morning, Honey. Been a long time since someone has cooked for me. You sure you don't need any help?"

"No. I don't need any help. Now shoo, go sit!" She gave Alex a quick kiss as she motioned for her to go sit down. "I worked too hard for you to let this get cold," Samantha continued as she opened the oven and pulled out the already done bagels, hash browns and breakfast strips. She finished cooking up the eggs and carried the plates over to the table.

"Well, even though I didn't see you upon awakening -- you're still the first face I see this morning. I slept great last night, how 'bout you?" Samantha asked as she filled Alex's plate with strips, toast and eggs.

"Same here," Alex admitted, "but as usual I was up almost before the sun. Everything's running like clockwork downstairs," she continued as she tried to find something wood to knock on. "All should be completed by Thursday or Friday. So . . . all that's left now is to figure out what **we're** going to do for the Open House." She looked over at Samantha and raised an eyebrow.

Samantha hadn't taken the bait so Alex began again. "Remember when I was talking about us working well as a team?"

"Uh, huh," Samantha responded, a mouth full of hash browns.

"Well, as I said before, I think we make a pretty good team. This Clinic of mine is too much for one person to run alone." Now she was the one running on at the mouth, a very unusual circumstance for Alex but she continued. "Working with Marge I always had office-type help at my fingertips. Now I need to supply my own. I already have the contract therapists, massage therapists, martial arts instructors and the first run of lecturers lined up, but I need someone to help me keep everything organized and keep the place flowing and running smoothly." She stopped and looked at Samantha who had stopped eating and was staring at her.



"Are you asking me to work for you?" Samantha questioned.

"No. Not exactly," Alex quickly replied. "Not just . . . work for me -- be a part of all that's going on -- be like my second in command." *Damn it, Alex -- she doesn't want to work with you. You should have waited until she at least acted like she might want to be part of the business.* "Listen, Honey, if you'd rather stay working where you are, I'll understand, honestly. I just thought it might be nice for us to be able to work together -- as a real team." *There you dropped it in her lap; it's up to her now!*

"Oh, Alex," Samantha exclaimed. "That's a marvelous idea -- I would love to work with you on a daily basis." Then her smile turned to a small frown. "But I may have to give some notice at *Flying Fingers*. Just up and quitting would not be a very nice thing to do to someone who made a place for me because Suz asked for a favor.

"Listen, Hon, I have no problem with giving Jane a call and telling her that I lured you away with money and fame," she laughed and continued on, "I don't think her company is extremely busy right now -- I think she's anticipating the extra work that'll be coming from here. So she will have at least a week-and-a-half to find a replacement for you and I will guarantee her that we will keep her busy."

"So -- what would I actually be doing, Alex," Samantha wanted to know.

"You will kind of be like the entertainment director on a cruise ship." Alex explained further, "You'll be in charge of keeping everyone happy. Anyone working with us will be able to come to you with their concerns, complaints or questions. You would also be in charge of coordinating the lectures and taking care of the visiting lecturers. Of course your most important job would be making sure that I got to see you during the day, fixing my breakfast, making my lunch . . . I'm only kidding!" She stretched out her hand to hold Samantha's on the other side of the table and smiled at the beaming blonde. *You'll be my partner in every sense of the word*, she thought to herself.

"Sounds like something I would be interested in doing for the rest of my life," Samantha admitted her eyes sparkling at the thought of being involved in every aspect of Alex's life.

"Wait -- I haven't told you the best part of your job." Alex put down her fork and looked deep into sparkling green eyes. "You would also have to go with me on business trips -- those for this company, which will not be a lot -- and those for Marge's, as I promised her to keep up with a few of my old customers for a little while and that includes traveling to where they are. And . . . you get to go to bed with the big boss." Alex smiled at her lover and waited for the final decision.

"So -- When do I start?" was the next question.

"You already have," came the answer as Alex's heart began to relax and she sat back to finish her breakfast. "Great breakfast, Samantha, thanks! You're gonna spoil me."

"You're very welcome -- Anytime," Samantha smiled back at her and added, "That's what I'm here for, remember?"

They continued to talk a little about the completion of the work being done, setting things up for the open house, calling in the subcontractors and basically everything they needed to discuss about getting the Clinic up and going. Samantha decided that she should be the one to talk to Jane first and if there was a problem she promised to let Alex handle it. They also decided that Samantha would get a lesson this evening on how the intercom system worked and on how to turn the security alarm system on and off.

After all the business discussion was out of the way, Alex opened the topic of Samantha's parents.

They discussed how Alex had always been an advocate of everyone coming out of the closet and being who they were. After all -- she had been raised in a very liberal family. Her parents both came from money, they were both self-employed and they were also very involved in the politics of the Gay and Lesbian Movement. Job security had never been a problem with either of them and they had passed that lack of concern on to their daughter. Alex had been brought up to be proud of who she was and where she came from and that attitude made it difficult for her to deal with people who were afraid to be themselves. She had always felt that gays who refused to come out were either ashamed of who they were or were just plain cowards.

Samantha voiced her concerns about Alex's opinions seeming a little harsh to be applied en masse to the entire Gay community and began to feel just a little bit disappointed in her lover's lack of compassion -- the feeling did not last more than a second or two. Alex read the expression on Samantha's face and pleaded with her to listen to the rest of what she had to say.

The conversation took a complete turn around. Alex confessed that she had always come from a place of comfort and had never realized that coming out could be a harmful experience. She was concerned that Samantha's parents would not take the change in their daughter's life kindly and she was afraid for Samantha both physically and mentally. She apologized for being so bigoted and guessed that she was now getting to walk in someone else's shoes. She didn't want Samantha to tell her parents until she was ready to do so and if it took a while, she was willing to wait.

Samantha was worried about where her parents would stay when they came to town for the Pageant of the Masters -- if she wasn't living in her apartment, she couldn't expect her folks to stay there with it empty. She asked if Alex thought she should leave some stuff there and just act like she hadn't moved into the warehouse. Alex didn't think that was a very good idea, she explained to Sam that a suite that was being designed especially for her parents was near completion. She could put a rush on the project and Samantha's parents could stay there. It was on the other side of the building from their apartment so would be nice and private for everyone.

Of course they had to talk about how Samantha was going to explain that she had quit one job and got another in the course of a week and that she had moved out of her apartment and into the warehouse.

"You could tell them that new living quarters was part of your perks for working for me -- that you got free rent here," Alex offered. "After all, I'm a woman living alone -- roommates are also safety features."

"That would probably work," Samantha agreed. "Could we set up one of the other bedrooms to look like it was mine?"

"Of course we could, silly -- just pile it full of your boxes -- no need to unpack everything. I'm sure your parents know you by now." Alex smiled broadly at the face in front of her.

"Very funny, Alex." Samantha sarcastically replied.

They discussed hiring a moving company to pack and move most of Samantha's stuff sometime within the week. Sam would go over to the apartment today and pick up whatever she would need for the next couple days.

It was a very busy breakfast and the first of many meetings of the minds, so to speak, of Alternative Paradise. Alex was ecstatic; everything was going according to her plan. Talking Samantha into taking the position had not turned out to be difficult at all. In her heart she wanted to make Samantha a full-fledged partner, right here and now but in her mind she knew better and just kept that little thought quietly to herself.

The intercom phone line rang through just as the gals were beginning to clear the table. Samantha waved Alex on with a gesture and continued toward the kitchen, dishes in hand.

"Ms. Dorian?" a male voice questioned.

"Yes," Alex replied.

"This is Erin down on the first floor, looks like your office furniture has arrived. Do you want me to hand it over to the super or are you able to come down?"

"I'll be right there. Have them wait," Alex answered the worker.

"Will do, Ms. Dorian," the man confirmed as he hung up the phone.

"Gotta go, Honey," Alex told Samantha on her way back to the kitchen. "Looks like the office furniture is here and I want to make sure it gets into the right offices the first time."

"No problem, Alex. I'm gonna finish up here, telephone Jane and then I'll be down to find you before I leave for the apartment to do a little packing." She kissed her lover tenderly, holding her soapy hands out from Alex's body -- "Better hurry before I get kinky and you get wet."

Alex laughed and moved away in mock fear. "Ooooo, I'm scared!" she laughed. "See ya in a bit."

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The phone call to Flying Fingers was not as difficult a conversation as Samantha had anticipated. Jane was extremely understanding. The younger woman had explained that she had been offered a substantial pay raise and benefits that were more than tempting. Jane, in return, told Samantha that the summer months were sometimes slow anyway and she had been afraid that she wouldn't be able to supply Samantha with enough work to make it worth her while at least until the new provider, Ms. Dorian, came on-board. She had more than enough sub-contractors to handle the workload and perhaps even enough to take on the new contract. It was a short, easy conversation and ended amiably.

Samantha said good-bye and then stared into the receiver with a puzzled look. *Damn, that was almost too easy! But at least I'm out from under and able to move on without any guilt.* She put the phone back on the cradle, got her purse and keys and went in search of Alex.

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"There you are," Samantha grinned at her lover who was standing by the finished railing looking down into the pool area. "I was sent all over Tartarus by those uninformed people you call workers!"

"Hi to you, too," Alex grinned back holding out her hand for Samantha to take. "Come 'ere, I want you to see the office I picked out for you."

She led the smaller woman back past the TaeBo and aerobics area and down toward the meditation rooms. "Here it is. It's directly above my office and you have a nice . . ."

"Alex, this is huge!" Samantha exclaimed. "And I've got an ocean view." She turned around and threw her arms around Alex's neck and kissed her. "But, do I really need this much space?" The smaller woman stepped away from her lover and motioned to the dimension of the room.

"You're going to be handling a lot of clients, and they need to see that you're important. This is an important looking room. I thought maybe tomorrow we could look through some of the books I have with office furniture and get an idea of what you want. What'd ya think?"

Samantha turned and stepped into waiting arms as she threw her own around Alex's waist placing her head on the chest of the most important person in her life. "This is all happening so quickly. I never knew I could be this happy." She looked up at her lover, "Do you think I will ever get tired of telling you how much I love you, Alex?"

"I certainly hope not! It happens to be one of my favorite sentences." She bent down and gently kissed her heart's delight. "I'm glad you're happy, Samantha. For the first time in a long time, I am too. Now -- back to the decisions at hand." She swept her hand around to encompass the room. "You'll need a bookcase, desk, chair, filing cabinet and a small conference table. Anything else you can think of off-hand?"

"No -- I don't think I would have even thought of all that. This is very new to me, Alex. I hope I don't disappoint you." Samantha said with an almost fearful look in her eyes.

"Samantha, nothing you could do would disappoint me," Alex assured her. "I have absolute faith in you." She took her lover's hand and started walking out the door.

Samantha pulled back a little and then whispered, "Alex, do you really think it's proper for us to be walking around holding hands in front of all these workers?"

"Samantha, if I were your husband and you were my wife and we had just gotten married and were so in love with each other that we couldn't keep our hands off one another -- do you think these people would mind if we walked around holding hands or even if I walked through the building with my arm around your shoulders?" Alex questioned her lover.

Shaking her head the answer came back, "No. But they would be . . ."

"No buts . . . if they would accept it from a male and female . . . they will accept it from us." Alex smiled at the smaller woman as she re-took her hand. "Besides -- if they don't like it -- they can quit. After all I am the boss!" She gave Sam a mischievous smile and whispered in her ear, "They ought to be happy that I don't decide to make a spectacle of us and kiss you in the middle of the reception area."

"Alex! You wouldn't!" Samantha countered.

"Oh, Samantha -- that almost sounds like a dare -- I never turn down a dare." The ebony-haired beauty confessed.

"No -- not a dare." Samantha said backing up with her hands up, palms facing Alex. "No dare here, Alex . . . honest. Let's just go to the car so I can get back before dinner." Samantha twittered nervously.

Alex just smiled at her and motioned in the direction of the outside door.

Walking along the connecting corridor between the warehouse and the garage, Alex mentioned that Samantha still had only seen part of the layout of the warehouse and the penthouse.

"I know," Samantha agreed, "but there's been so much happening, so quickly. My head's spinning and now I have moving to do, also."

"Don't worry about the moving, Samantha. I told you we'd get a company to take care of that. You can unpack at you leisure." Alex opened the garage door and let Sam enter. She walked in and the door automatically began to close behind her.

Sam had walked over to the VW and just as she was about to open the door and get in she stopped. "Wait a minute." She began to scrutinize the outside of the car, starting with the driver's side and walking around the entire vehicle. "What happened to my car, Alex."

"What'd ya mean, what happened to it?" Alex asked raising a questioning brow.

"There was a ding from a shopping cart -- right here -- she pointed to a spot just under the window of the back seat." Continuing on back around the car she pointed out another blemish that had disappeared and then a ding and then even a bend in one of the bumpers. "Tell me, Alex, is this a magical garage? If I didn't know better I would say this little baby's been to the body and paint doctor and has come back looking better than new? What's up?"

"There was a little incident while we were gone," Alex mumbled.

"A what?" Samantha asked looking Alex directly in the face.

"A little incident . . ." Alex repeated.

"What kind of incident?" Samantha wanted to know.

"It was really no biggy. The garage hadn't been hooked up to the security system properly and while we were up in San Francisco someone vandalized the garage. My car wasn't around, so they targeted yours." She looked at Sam who was walking around the car shaking her head.

"Samantha -- the security agency took care of everything -- it was their fault." Alex walked over to Samantha and turned her around.

"How was it their fault the garage was broken into?" The small blonde asked.

"It wasn't their fault for the break-in. It was their fault the cops didn't get here quicker and catch the culprit. They hadn't wired the garage completely. I think I know who did it and he probably got his destructive revenge out of his system." Alex lifted Samantha's face for their eyes to meet. "I'm sure it won't happen again." She assured Samantha.

"You can't be sure of that, Alex," Samantha said downheartedly. "I thought Laguna was a safer place than most."

"Don't go there, Honey. Laguna is a safer place than most -- this all came about because I fired a hot head and he wanted to get even with me. Just with me, Samantha. It has nothing to do with Laguna, nothing to do with you. Please -- don't let this worry you." She put her arms around the smaller woman's waist, bringing their bodies to a touching stance as she tried to ease unfounded fears.

"Come on, Sam, this has been a great day so far. Your car has a face-lift and the situation's well in hand. Go get some of your stuff and get your butt back here before I miss you too much." Alex held her tight, while telling her to go, sending opposing signals to the object of her affection.

Samantha lifted her face to gaze into eyes trying to smile but filled with concern. Alex bent down and gently placed a soft kiss on trembling lips. It had been hours since she had touched the blonde and her body began to tingle as her lover surrendered to her embrace.

"By all that is, Alex, I do feel safe when your arms are wrapped around me," Samantha whispered as she brought her own arms up and placed them around her hero's neck. The kiss of affection had become one of passion as Samantha's lips returned to Alex's, parting slightly, the warm tip of her tongue beckoning her playmate to join her.

Hands held waist high moved to a lower position, fondling the shapely buttocks beneath the light cotton shorts Samantha wore. One hand remained steadfast, preventing the smaller woman from moving as the other traveled around the svelte shape to the opposite side, slipping gracefully up under the leg of the shorts and finding its destination at the soft mound of curly hair.

Moans of pleasure emanated from the throat of the small blonde as a caressing hand found moistness at its fingertips.

A deep masculine cough, followed by a clearing throat brought Alex quickly spinning around to face the now open garage door.

Samantha fell down onto the seat of the VW, almost hitting her head on the way, as Alex glared at the intruder. "Don't you know how to knock?" She spat at the innocent worker.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," came the reply, "but the door was ajar -- I simply . . . gave it a little push and . . ."

"Well? What is it?" Alex questioned the now red-faced young man standing on the other side of the room.

"Ah . . . the super said . . . you wanted to know when we had all the furniture for your room ready to be placed. I . . . didn't mean to interrupt . . ."

"Okay. It's okay," Alex gave the man a backward wave of her hand to indicate he could leave. "I'll be there in a few minutes. Tell the men to take a 10 minute break."

Feeling quite dismissed and also relieved to be able to leave the presence of the agitated female, he practically ran from the doorway, but not before making sure the garage door was tightly closed.

Alex turned around and the look of comic relief on Samantha's face prompted her to break into uncontrollable laughter.

"What's so funny?" Samantha queried.

"Oh, Honey, the look on your face!" Alex chuckled, her laughter becoming contagious as Samantha also began to giggle. "I don't think that unfortunate young man had any idea what he walked in on. Between my car and my body, you were almost totally hidden. I guess we're going to have to use a little more discretion during business hours." With one arm on the top of the Volkswagen and the other on the open door, she leaned inside and gave Samantha a quick kiss, "So, you go get what you need and I'll see you in a little while."

"Okay, Alex. Don't work too hard." Samantha started the car as Alex walked over to the panel that operated the garage doors. "I won't be long. But I think the first thing I'll do when I get there is take a nice cold shower!" She laughed and waved at her lover as she left the garage on her way to the apartment that was now nothing more than a place to store stuff.

Alex walked back into the building making a mental note to have someone check the automatic door that was supposed to completely close on its own.

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Technology could definitely be a double-edged sword. When Samantha opened the apartment door she could see the telephone message machine blinking. Inspection of the machine showed that it was almost at its limit for calls. All the calls were from the same two women -- her mom and Suzanne. As usual, her mom hadn't paid a bit of attention to the statement she had made days ago about not always being at home and by the time she had placed the final call last night, she was sounding very close to being in a panic. Consequently, the first hour-and-a-half of Samantha's time at the apartment was spent trying to calm her mother down, and explaining to her that she had been away with a female friend for the past few days. She didn't want to lie, but she wasn't ready to go into detail so she explained a little about the job change and the apartment change. Her mom listened quietly as Samantha explained that she felt the new job was one with a lot more prestige, adding that she would be almost like her own boss with quite a bit of responsibility and a large salary increase to boot (she knew that would please her mother, money compensation always did). She went on to tell her a little about Alex and as soon as she could finagle to change the subject she did. She got her mom to talking about things at home and breathed a sigh of relief when the topic did not return to her and where she had been for the past five days.

After getting off the phone with her mother, Samantha plopped down on the couch and started to cry. All the pent up emotion she had kept at bay while she was on the phone was released. She wanted so to tell her mom how she had finally found the love of her life, the one thing her mother had been talking about for the past couple years. She wanted to say how happy she was that she had found Alex, but she couldn't -- she couldn't even bring herself to admit that it was Alex she had gone away with. She felt like she had betrayed both her lover and her mother by not telling the latter about the former. This time in her life was supposed to be joyous, not confusing and difficult. She still had to make a convincing enough story for both her parents so they would not get an inkling that anything unusual was going on between her and Alex -- not that she thought that would even enter their minds.

This was going to be a lot more complicated than she had first anticipated. And much more difficult to deal with as she was already getting guilt feelings from both sides. Samantha seriously thought about just writing her parents a letter and telling them everything. She knew Alex would be there for her, but she just couldn't bring herself to sit down and write. She knew she would have to face her decision one day, but she wanted a little time to consider how to go about doing it -- she didn't want to lose her family, but she hated feeling guilty about being in love with Alex.



For a day that started out as good as it had, it was taking a terrible turn. *No, Samantha -- you're not going to let this spoil your day. Get a grip! Put it out of your mind for now. You will figure out how to deal in due time.* She got up and went into the bathroom, washed her face and then did a little mirror work, telling the face that stared back at her that all would be well. The day became brighter as the face looking back at her began to smile. *Think of Alex.* The face in the mirror ordered. *Think of her smile.* The face smiled at her. *Think of her touch.* "No, that's enough -- we don't need to go there right now," she told the face, laughed and left the bathroom.

Next on the agenda was to call Suz back. As luck would have it, she ended up getting the answering machine. She didn't want to explain to her friend over the phone the change that had occurred in her life. She wanted to tell Suzanne face to face about Alex and all that had transpired in San Francisco. She knew her friend would be happy for her but she felt she owed it to her to tell her in person. She gave Suzanne Alex's number and told her to call back there.

The rest of the day had sped along as she went through clothes, choosing those she would need right away and those she could let sit in a box for a little while. She made sure to get her necessary items out of the bathroom and bedroom. Alex called once just to say hi and see how everything was going and she told her all was well and she that would be back as soon as she could. She reminded Alex that she did not have her keys to the warehouse with her and Alex told her the doors would still be unlocked when she got home. *Home*, she thought to herself and smiled. Her heart was there with Alex so that would absolutely be her home. The last things she packed were the perishable items that had been left in the freezer and the refrigerator.

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By the time Samantha got back to the warehouse it was almost six o'clock. All the workers had gone and she was glad that Alex would be the only person she would run into. She did not want to look up into the face of one of the workers only to see that gossip had been spread around the entire complex. She was really embarrassed by what had happened in the garage but when she stopped to think about it, she would have still responded in the same way again.

The garage door was open so she pulled the car right in next to Alex's. Getting out of the VW she looked around for a 4-wheel wonder to cart the first load up to the apartment. When she didn't find anything, she picked up the box with the refrigerator stuff in it and headed toward the building. She buzzed Alex from beside the elevator and was told to come on up and then they would go back down together and get the rest of the stuff.

Arriving at the top floor, Alex was there to greet her and take the box out of her arms. "Here, let me get that! You shouldn't be carrying this, it's heavy," Alex said in a semi-scolding tone.

"Alex, it's not that heavy," Samantha defended herself. "I've lifted heavier."

"Whatever," came the answer as she put the box on the kitchen counter.

Samantha emptied the box, filling up Alex's refrigerator in the process. "Well, that ought to keep us for a little while. At least it looks like you actually eat here occasionally," the small blonde teased her companion.

"What do you say to us cleaning up and going out to eat tonight? You've had a really busy day and I don't think I have the makings of a complete meal in here even with all you've just brought over." Alex waited for Samantha's response and when it was affirmative she smiled broadly

"One of my favorite restaurants is up on Cliff Drive at Heisler Point; it has a beautiful ocean view and the food is excellent. You'll really love this place, Samantha. Why don't I call for reservations, give us enough time to shower and dress and then we'll go. We can bring your stuff up on the way in or better yet, I'll get one of the workers to bring it all up in the morning."

The only thing that troubled Samantha was Alex paying for everything. She didn't know how to bring up the subject. She was too tired to think about cooking dinner and eating out was more than appealing. Finances needed to be discussed but she put them on the back burner for tonight as she headed for the bathroom and a nice hot shower.

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As promised, dinner was elegant, delicious and scenic. Atmosphere was something the restaurant basked in as the candlelight on the tables softly illuminated the faces of two women oblivious to the world around them. Soft jazz accompanied the meal and twice the waiter had to touch Alex's shoulder to get her attention away from the face that seemed to have captivated her completely. It was their first night out and about in Laguna and Alex wanted to make sure it was a night to remember. She was, of course, an expert in wining and dining and knew exactly what the rest of the evening held in store for the adorable blonde sitting across the table from her.

The gals got back around 9:30. During dinner Alex had talked Samantha into having one of the workers unload the Volkswagen in the morning. There was nothing left for them to do but ascend in the elevator lock up and retire for the evening.

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Samantha headed immediately for the bathroom and decided to get ready for bed while she was in there and Alex was busying herself in the kitchen. Samantha decided it was time for a change from the nightshirts Alex was used to seeing on her. She donned a pale green silk negligee she had brought from the apartment and felt much more alluring. This had been a rather special evening because it was the first time they had been to such an elegant restaurant alone. It was a topsy-turvy kind of situation, like having the first date after the wedding but she was feeling wonderful and thought it appropriate to try to look as seductive as she felt.

She walked into the living room and Alex did a double take, almost dropping the two glasses of wine she was bringing over to the small table by the windows. "Damn, Samantha. You might have at least warned me. Red is not a good color on an off-white carpet." She smiled at her lover, as she put the glasses down and drew her into an embrace. "Want to skip the nightcap?" she

whispered in Samantha's ear. "I think I could make you forget you even wanted one." She nibbled delicately on the small blonde's ear lobe as she ran long, teasing fingers down Samantha's neck, over her breasts, around her body, stopping on the firm, round buttocks. Gently she began to lift the smaller woman and Samantha helped by wrapping her legs around Alex's waist, her arms encircling the taller woman's neck. "Guess this nightie won't be on for long, will it?" she questioned provocatively.

"You can bet it won't," came the soft, low whisper from Alex, followed by a "Damn -- we need to lock up first!"

"Well, I'll just carry you over to the security panel and give you your first lesson." Alex walked across the hall to the panel next to the elevator with Sam still kissing her neck and whispering in her ear.

"If you ever want to continue with tonight's game plan you had better behave for a few minutes," Alex continued.

Samantha released her leg hold from around the tall woman's waist and stood on the floor in front of her. Alex turned Sam around to face the controls. "No more funny stuff until everything's all locked up and secure, you hear?" Alex smiled and then blew warm breath into Samantha's hair, sending more love bumps down her back.

"Stop it, Alex. If I have to behave -- so do you!" Samantha whined as she wiggled her shoulders up and down, twisting her head in mock irritation.

"This really shouldn't take long, I already know you're a quick study," the smile on Alex's face was unmistakable in her voice.

She shook her head to get the scent of Samantha's perfume out of her nostrils so she could concentrate on the chore at hand and began the process of engaging the entire security system.

"As you already know, we have a few of the intercom systems set up in the apartment, but this panel controls all the sound and motion detectors on the first and second floors. We should probably make sure all the doors are locked after everyone leaves the clinic in the evening. The rest of the security system can be put on before we go to bed. But I guess it's pretty important since there is no way we could hear someone down on the first or second floor without turning these on. When everything is on the security company takes over surveillance." She looked over at Samantha. "But, since we are in the process of getting ready for bed -- we should do it now before we forget. And I know I would forget all about it with a vision like you standing before me." She breathed a deep sigh and continued on with the lesson.

She pointed out each step in the process of turning on the sound/motion detectors on the first floor. "You just flip this switch here so that you can see the red and it will let you know that the sound is on -- this one is for the motion. As she flipped the second switch and pointed to the area where motion would be detected, it was . . . there were three distinct areas of movement coming through on the panel and at first Alex just stood there watching.

One of the figures was located in the gym, one near the climbing wall and the other over in the pool area.

"Alex -- what should we do. You haven't turned the entire alarm on yet so the police won't be coming. Should you go ahead and turn it all on so they will?" The panic in Samantha's voice made the taller woman comfort her by placing an arm around her shoulders.

"Listen carefully, Samantha," Alex said looking directly into Sam's eyes. "I am going to take the stairs down and see what's happening."

"No, Alex," the smaller woman pleaded. "Please don't go down there alone!"

"Samantha -- I said listen. I am going down and I want you to give me 15 minutes and then phone 911. I don't want them coming too soon and scaring the culprits away. These guys need to be taught a lesson and then arrested. Let me get things under control and then call the cops." She looked at the frightened woman standing beside her. "Do you have all that, Samantha?"

"Ye . . . yes . . . please be careful, Alex," came the fearful plea.

"I will. You stay here!" Alex opened the door to the stairs and started down.

Taking the steps three at a time she quickly made her way to the first floor, quietly opened the door and let her eyes get accustomed to the dimly lit rooms. The only illumination came from outside and from the small night lights that had been strategically placed in various electrical outlets throughout the Clinic. She could hear one of the culprits in front of her in the gym area. Listening intently she also knew there was a second one behind her near the climbing wall. The third was not to be heard so she assumed he was still somewhere around the pools.

She crept around toward the wall as the one in the gym yelled out. "Hey, Jake. Did you say just to loosen the bolts in this equipment or . . ."

"I don't want anyone to notice that the equipment has been tampered with," came the rough growling voice from near the climbing wall as the man turned and headed toward the gym.

*You son-of-a-bitch. I had a feeling I hadn't seen the last of you. Did you have to bring the other two Stooges with you?* Alex thought to herself as she recognized the name and the voice. *Guess I have to actually put you behind bars before you'll leave me alone.* She readied herself for confrontation.

"And keep your voice down, idiot; you know they just went upstairs. Stupid dyke forgot to lock the doors after her -- saved us the trouble of having to break in," Jake went on coming around the corner to help his companion

Alex decided to let Jake pass in front of her and to head for the pool area first and take out the solitary conspirator there. She'd be back for "Curly and Mo" just as soon as she took care of the lone Stooge. Just as she had suspected, number three was over by the Jacuzzi. He was down on

his knees pouring something into the water. *Okay, Larry -- time to test the results of your labors.* Knowing that a splash would not be heard from the gym she walked up behind him. He turned at the sound of her footsteps, thinking it was one of his buddies and was unpleasantly surprised by a fist in the face, which sent him spiraling backwards into the chemically infected Jacuzzi. He had knocked his head on the side as he landed and was knocked out, floating face up. Alex went into the dressing area and pulled a couple hair dryers from the wall, tearing off the cords to use as bonding. Going back over to the Jacuzzi, she pulled the unconscious man from the pool and tied him up, gagging him with a towel from the locker room supplies. She left him lying on the floor, gagged, tied and beginning to show signs of chemical burns on his skin.

*One down -- That was a piece of cake. Here's hoping the other two are just as stupid.*

From the sound of the commotion she heard going back toward the gym, Alex figured the guy had to be a klutz and that usually meant she'd be dealing with a big ox. She cautiously slithered around the inside wall so as not to be spotted and observed him over by the Universal gym, loosening bolts. She picked up a sand filled ankle weight and a small barbell on her way to the goon. Alex didn't want to have to take him and Jake on at the same time, not that she couldn't, it would just be easier if she could deal with this one and then go after the other big guy.

"Hey," she whispered loud enough for him to hear, "whatcha doing big boy?"

The look of astonishment almost made her laugh as he stared at her in disbelief. His next move was to open his mouth and yell to his friend when he was assaulted squarely in the Adam's apple with an ankle weight, stopping all thoughts of any immediate speech. He picked up the wrench he had dropped on the floor and started over in Alex's direction, holding his throat with his other hand. If he had had the ability to spew forth steam, Alex would have seen it rising. She met him halfway, a crooked smile on her face, her hands moving in a come hither motion. As he pulled his arm back in preparation of delivering a blow to his adversary, she completed a quick spin and waist level kick that landed directly in his groin with enough force to knock him off his feet. Almost angrier than he was hurt, he got onto his knees and then back on his feet, his main problem seeming to be not knowing which to hold first -- his neck or his throbbing groin. It was an awkward raging bull of a man who once again came charging in Alex's direction.

His voice began to come back and he spat vicious words in the direction of the beauty before him. "God damn bull dyke, why I oughta fuck you right here as soon as I'm done beating the shit out of you. I hate your kind."

"I'm sorry, am I missing something here?" Alex taunted the already furious man. "If I didn't know better, I would swear that it was I who was beating the shit out of you - you no good excuse for a human." She had enough of looking at him, listening to him and fooling with him. She swung around and kicked him in the chest. Before he had a chance to recover she came at him again. Leaping gracefully in the air she launched her right foot toward his lower jaw. The two collided and she could hear the bone crack as foot-to-jaw contact was made. Alex watched, a grim smile on her face, as he was propelled backward and ended up crumpled in a heap on the floor.

"So much for your 'fucking' me, you asinine piece of shit," she said to unhearing ears, before she turned her attention to the other room.

She knew the commotion they had caused had to have been heard by Jake. Quickly she raced toward the climbing wall, not wanting the third and most important of the intruders to escape punishment. Alex came to a dead stop as she reached the hall and saw Samantha coming toward her from the elevator with Jake at her back.

"Well, well," the oversized oaf grunted. "Looky what I got here!" He grabbed Samantha from behind, one arm around her waist, the other around her neck. "This your new little plaything, dyke? Bet she's pretty good in the sack?"

"You let her go!" Alex commanded.

"Now that's not very civilized. How'd ya like to share?" He sneered at Alex, tightening his hold on Samantha as he rubbed his face against hers.

"I said let her go." Alex repeated slowly edging closer, a maniacal grin on her face. "This is between you and me big guy. Why don't you just let her go?"

At this point it became a game of cat and mouse between Alex and the disgruntled ex-employee. Alex tried to figure out how she could get Samantha away from the big man without putting the small woman in more danger than she already was. He continued to hold the upper hand as long as he had Samantha in his grasp.

All of a sudden the man's jaw slackened and his eyes opened wide. Suddenly he was holding nothing but dead weight in his arms as Samantha did what any self-respecting lady would do -- she fainted.

The thug looked down at the limp woman in his grasp, giving Alex just the opening she needed to throw the barbell she had carried with her from the other room, hitting him in the head and knocking him off balance. He was not over the shock of the impact when he felt an incredibly searing pain in his arm as Samantha sunk her teeth deep into it, drawing blood and causing him to release her. She fell onto her knees and crawled toward Alex as Alex descended upon Jake with a mighty blow to his chest, followed by a fist in the face and a sweep to his knees, bringing him down hard. Alex had a firm hold on his hair and was pulling him up, about to hit him again when the front doors flew open and uniformed police officers ran into the building, guns unholstered, shouting warnings.

"Okay -- time to break it up," one of the officers said upon entering the area.

He came over to where Alex stood poised to continue her attack. "I'll take him from here, Miss."

While he was cuffing Jake and reading him his rights, Alex grabbed Samantha and pulled her close. "You okay, baby?" she whispered in her ear.

"Yeah, Alex," Samantha answered looking up into deeply concerned eyes. "I'm fine now. Go ahead, tell the policemen where the other guys are. Let's get this over with."

Alex turned to the policeman and explained the entire incident, sending one of the officers into the pool room and escorting the other to the gym. After all the paper work was finished Alex concluded her conversation with the officers by telling them that she thought Jake had been the intruder who had vandalized her garage only days before. She explained to them that he had been fired for fighting on the job and was obviously determined to get even with her. She thanked the officers for arriving so expediently and informed them they would be getting a nice donation from her company for the next Policeman's Ball. The lieutenant in charge assured Alex it was all in a day's work and told her that he would make sure everything was handled properly back at the station. He wished the two women a pleasant, uneventful evening from here on in and headed toward the exit.

Alex walked them out and then immediately locked all the doors, turned and opened her arms to Samantha who did not need a second invitation.

"Oh, Alex," she began . . . "I was so afraid for you."

"Didn't I tell you to stay upstairs?" Alex gently chided the woman in her arms.

"Yes, but . . ."

"You could have gotten yourself hurt and I would have never forgiven myself for that," Alex continued as she hushed the smaller woman by putting a finger to her lips. "I didn't want you in harm's way, Samantha."

"Oh, and I guess I wanted You there?" came the statement from the small blonde as she pulled away and placed her hands on her hips. "I think I handled myself pretty damn good! I feigned fainting, didn't I?"

"That was a fake faint?" Alex responded, laughing at the indignant stance her lover was taking.

"Do you really think I'm such a sissy that I would faint in a situation like that? Well, I . . ."

Alex grabbed her up and swung her around. "I don't care how sissy or not sissy I think you are -- I still don't want Anything to happen to you. My heart was in my throat when that idiot had his grimy paws around you! He's lucky I didn't do him permanent damage in the area of his precious jewels when I had the chance." Alex kissed Samantha and squelched any possibility of a sarcastic come back for thinking her unable to take care of herself.

Lost in the moment and swept away in the arms of her lover, Samantha quickly forgot all about the indignity of being thought of as a weakling. She hung onto Alex, her body forgetting the situation they had just left for the present touch of her lover's body. Alex's scent filled her nostrils and her entire being trembled at Alex's touch. When their lips finally separated, Alex

whispered in Samantha's ear, "What do you say we call it an evening in more comfortable surroundings?"

"My thoughts exactly," came the response as the blonde loosened her hold on her lover's neck. Hand in hand they walked over to the elevator.

On the way upstairs Alex brought them back into the real world. She remarked that now they would have to have everything in the building re-checked to make sure there were no accidents when clients began arriving. A thorough investigation of all the equipment and the pool areas would be costly, but it was a necessity. She was sure they had caught the miscreants in time but she couldn't be positive, so she would hire someone to inspect the entire first floor, and perhaps it wouldn't hurt to have them check out the second floor as well.

They got out of the elevator and Samantha went on into the living room while Alex turned on the security system. There would be no more lessons tonight. She wanted to get everything locked up and then take the mood of the evening back an hour or so to before the intrusion.

"Everything's secure and all alarms are on, now where were we?" Alex walked into the living room, her senses pleasantly assaulted by the smell of sweet vanilla candles, the sound of soft jazz and the beckoning of her naked lover sitting by the window surrounded by pillows, two glasses of wine in her hands.

She kicked off her shoes and undressed while walking across the living room floor, leaving a trail of clothing on the way to the beauty sensually poised between two pillows.

"I changed the red for spumante -- less chance of a stain." Samantha handed Alex one of the glasses as sapphires met emeralds and locked in a passionate exchange without uttering another word.

Alex took the glass and sat beside Samantha. She offered the small woman the wine from her glass and as Samantha began to drink she made sure that droplets fell from the lips, trickling down her chin and landing on the body beneath. Alex relieved Samantha of her glass, placed her left hand behind her lover's head and gently assisted her as she lay back on one of the pillows.

"Looks like some of the wine spilled. We can't have it reaching the carpet, white or not." Soft lips caught small beads of wine from the tip of Samantha's chin, sucking all the wet until it was dry and then continuing down to between the breasts where more of the sparkling liquid had somehow found its way.

"I've always believed in sharing," Alex confessed as she took a sip from the glass she still held in her right hand. She leaned over Samantha and kissed her, allowing some of the sweet nectar to be shared as parted lips accepted both the liquid and the tongue that followed.

"You go well with white wine, my Destiny, it sweetens even more when it touches your skin." Alex took the remaining pearls of liquid and drizzled them down the crevice between Samantha's breasts and into the small indentation that was her navel. "We can't waste any of that wine now



can we?" she smiled down at her heart's desire as she sucked and licked the fruit of the vine until all traces were gone.

Consumed with a passion she could no longer control she took Samantha in her arms and quenched the thirst that had been growing since the romantic dinner so many hours before. Samantha responded to every move, every touch, every kiss. Their bodies fit together as though they had been cast from the same mold, separated and fired independently and were now being given the chance to again become the sum of their two parts. All residue of the transgression upon their privacy was put aside while the lovers basked only in the intimacies of each other. The stars and the moon beamed light into the room creating a magical iridescence on the two shadowy forms that seemed to appear as one. The ocean below added a slow undulating rhythm with periodic crescendos of crashing waves. Sleep came as the aftermath of orgasmic gratification, and the two women, surrounded by a comforting wall of pillows, each cradled in the arms of someone who loved her more with each passing day, dreamed away what was left of the night.

Continued in Part 12.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 12

### Chapter 12

Alex stretched to get the kinks out of her back and legs. *I'm getting too old to be sleeping on the floor -- I need to remember to end up in bed the next time*, she reminded herself as she stood and stretched again. She decided to let Sam sleep for a few more minutes while she started the tea and went to the bathroom.

Today's agenda included hiring someone to do a thorough check of the entire warehouse in search of signs of vandalism. All the equipment had to be gone over with a fine tooth comb and the climbing wall especially needed an extensive examination. She hated the extra time it was going to take to accomplish that task but it was unavoidable after last night's little fiasco. At this point she really didn't care what happened to Jake and his little group as long as they stayed out of her warehouse and away from her.

The phone rang just as she reached the kitchen area and she got it on the second ring, hoping she still had the bedroom ringer on low.

"Hello," she quietly answered the phone.

"Hi, Honey," the familiar voice of her mother came over the line. "I thought this would be the best time to catch you still in the apartment. We haven't talked in close to a week and Kelley was asking me how the clinic was coming along."

"The clinic should be ready for open house next Friday, Mom. All the necessary stuff's here and in place so we'll be sending out the invitations probably today."

"Did you say 'We', Alex?" her mother questioned.

"Yes. I said 'We'," came the immediate response.

"So? . . ." Aurora wanted to know.

"Remember the person I told you about . . . the one you suggested I take to the Sawdust Festival?"

"Yes."

"Well, I took her to San Francisco with me instead." With bated breath Alex waited for the response from her mother.

"You What? You mean that girl you said might be straight?" The anxiety in Aurora's voice was almost laughable.

"Calm down, Mom. She's not straight, *Not any more*. And I know this sounds ridiculous coming from me, but I think I've found my soulmate." There she had said it.

Silence on the other end of the line.

"Did you hear me, Mom?"

"Yes, Alex. I heard you. You've found your soulmate."

"And . . ." Alex wanted to know.

"And what? I guess I should say congratulations."

"Well that might be a start," came the sarcastic reply from the Laguna end of the line.

"Don't get snippy, little lady. The proofs in the pudding, remember? When do we get to meet this new person?"

"At the open house next Friday. You're going to fall in love with her Mom -- and Kelley will like her, too, I'm sure of it." It started out as a statement but ended up almost as a question. When it came to Alex, no one was ever good enough in Kelley's eyes; she had spoiled her daughter from the inception and always seemed to find some fault in anyone Alex had brought home. *I just know Kelley will like Samantha. What's not to like? Damn, why do I always feel like such a Kid when it comes to affairs of the heart and my parents? Alex, get a grip!*

"So," her mother continued, "I guess we'll be meeting this story telling, beach and sunset loving, 5'4" fairy-haired, cute blonde with just the right built, green eyes and an imagination -- before the Pageant of the Masters then." Aurora laughed, "Didn't think I'd remember that description, did ya?"

Alex laughed back at her Mom. "No, as a matter of fact I didn't. But, I should've known better. Bet you wrote it all down the minute I got off the phone the other night so you could quote it back to me verbatim." She smiled to herself knowing her mother's little tricks to remembering everything she was told so she would always have a comeback.

"Well . . ."

"Samantha is very excited to meet you, Mom. We were up in San Francisco with Sonny and Ray when you got tiptoed into the conversation by your number one guy fan in the world. He just couldn't wait to tell Samantha all about you."

"He's such a sweetheart," Aurora confirmed. "Will they be down for the open house?"

"Try to keep them away!" came the reply from her daughter. "You wouldn't believe the way Sonny and Samantha hit it off -- like they'd known each other for years! It was a marvelous trip, Mom, the most fun I've had in a very long time."

"Alex, it sounds like this Samantha is making you very happy. I surely hope it continues to grow. You deserve some joy in your life after that last . . ."

"Mom -- let's not talk about her right now, okay? This is a pleasant conversation." A small frown took the place of the smile that had been on Alex's face since the beginning of the call.

"Okay, honey." Aurora agreed that conversations should be kept on as positive a note as possible and talking about Nikki was never a positive subject. "I'll let you go and get ready for work and I'll inform Kelley that next Friday -- that's a week from this Friday, right?"

"Right," her daughter confirmed.

"Next Friday is the open house. So -- will we have somewhere to sleep or should I make reservations elsewhere?" her mother wanted to know.

"I'll make sure your rooms are finished before Friday. *I already promised Sam to get them done ASAP.* So, if you want to come on up Thursday night we can all have dinner together and you can get to meet Samantha before I have a warehouse full of people to deal with as well." That seemed to be the best way to handle the situation and she was hoping that her parents would decide to come early.

"What about Sonny and Ray? Are you putting them up as well?"

"Yes, we'll be furnishing the second bedroom this week. Damn, Mom, when I think about it we really have a lot to do before next Friday. I thought things would slow down a little, but they just seem to be getting more complicated." Alex hadn't thought about having to go shopping since the talk with Sam about having her parents come and stay while they were in town and had totally forgotten that they needed to furnish a bedroom that looked like Samantha.

Aurora sincerely congratulated Alex on her new girlfriend and told her she was anxious to meet her. "Did she know who I was when Sonny let my name out of the bag?"

"Actually, Mom she does have some of your tapes and books. But I don't think you'll be uncomfortable with her -- she just has a lot of energy and gets excited easily," she answered with a smile in her voice.

"Oh -- she's a lot like you?" Aurora answered sarcastically.

"Right," came the curt answer.

"Please tell me she's not a groupie!"

"No, Mom, it will be an easy introduction, I'm sure of it. She just likes to talk a lot . . . but so do you!" Alex laughed and told her mother that she really needed to get down to the clinic. She had decided not to mention the little bit of excitement that had happened last night. No need in getting her mother all upset over something she had no control over.

"Okay, Alex. I'll talk to you before we come up. You take care of yourself, now, you hear me?"

"Yes, Mom -- I try. Give my love to Kelley."

"I will, honey. We love you. Bye." With that the line to La Jolla was disconnected as Aurora hung up the phone.

Alex sighed, happy to have the conversation about her and Sam out of the way with her Mom. Now the anticipation of their meeting was lightened slightly. And she knew Kelley would like her new love.

The tea was brewed and Alex decided it was time to awaken the sleepyhead in the other room and start this soon to be busy day. Just as she was ready to leave the kitchen with two cups of tea in hand the phone rang, again.

*Who could be calling here at this hour?* "Hello."

A soft, "Hi" came from the other end of the receiver. "Is Samantha Riley there?"

"May I ask who's calling?" Alex questioned, wondering who in the world had her private number.

"This is Suzanne McClane. I'm a close friend of Samantha's and she left this number for me to call. Is it too early? I could call back." The voice on the other end began to have a nervous twinge to it.

"No, no," Alex reassured, "Samantha's here. It's just that she's sleeping right now. Could I have her give you a call back as soon as she gets up."

"Y-e-a-h, that would be just fine. Thanks. Just tell her to call Suz, please. Bye."

The phone went dead in her hand and Alex stood looking at the receiver with a puzzled expression on her face.

*Okay, weird friend. I think that's the redhead. Sounded like a redhead.* Alex laughed to herself putting the phone down and picking the teas back up.

She walked over to where the small blonde lay cuddling one of the large pillows and put the teas on the table. *Furniture for this room is going to be top priority, she told herself, with an extremely comfortable couch!*

"Wake up, Samantha. We have a lot to do today." Kneeling down she kissed her lover gently on the cheek, ran her fingers down the contour of the sleeping woman's small frame and then shook her a little to awaken her.

"Oh, it's too early to think of getting up," came the response from the body on the floor.

"No, it's not. It's just the right time to get up. You've got a lot to accomplish today." Alex started to take the pillow from Samantha's grasp.

"Don't -- that's my comfort pillow -- give it back," the groggy woman on the floor whined.

"Your comfort pillow?"

"Yeah, when you left I guess I grabbed it; it smells like you so I get the security that you're still around." Samantha opened her eyes to slits and looked up. "By the Gods, you're beautiful -- even in the morning." She stared at the naked figure before her and memories of last night came flooding into her half-awake mind.

"Oh, yeah! Now I know you're still asleep." Alex reached down and grabbed Samantha's hands pulling the smaller woman up as she herself stood.

"I'm not as asleep as you think." Samantha grabbed the tea cup from the table and took a drink, swirling the warm liquid around in her mouth, to get rid of her morning mouth and taste. She turned back around to face Alex, hands caressing the soft skin on the body touching hers.

"Do we have time for a reenactment of last night, or is the boss in a big hurry to get down to business?" Samantha continued running her hands along Alex's body, her own body tingling to the tactile encounter. "Damn, you feel good." She took one of the breasts that were practically mouth height into her mouth and gently sucked on it. "It's always good to start the morning off with a protein breakfast," came a mumbled statement as one of her hands found it's way to the already moistened area between her lover's legs.

"My knees are buckling!" Alex laughed, holding the smaller woman close. "Do you actually expect me to stand here without moving while you are doing that?"

"No, I say the last one to the bed gets to be on the bottom." Samantha smiled, giving herself a head start on the way to the bedroom.

"Did you forget how much longer my legs are than yours?" Alex questioned as she landed on the bed seconds before the small blonde. She laid on her back, smiling and pulled Samantha down on top of her, then holding onto her lover switched positions and ended up on top.

"There you go again . . . this was my idea . . ." Try as she would Samantha could not get Alex to roll over. The dark-haired beauty simply smiled at all the energy expended by the small woman under her.

"Tell you what . . ." Alex started.

"What?" Samantha huffed back.

"Never mind -- you'll see."

"What do you mean, I'll see?" Samantha looked questioningly up into glimmering sapphire eyes. She started to speak again when Alex leaned over and passionately began kissing her. "Samantha, hush."

Samantha hushed.

As the fondling and kissing continued Alex allowed herself to be rolled over and ended up landing on the bottom. Samantha thought to herself that the move was all too easily accomplished but she really didn't care. Alex was on the bottom and that's where she wanted her.

The experience that followed was unsurpassed by anything Samantha had ever experienced before. As she started to move her body down on Alex's she was held by two strong hands that moved her around, positioning her differently. Instead of ending up between Alex's legs, looking like an extension of the taller woman, she was being placed beside Alex but in the opposite direction.

Okay she thought to herself, this is really unusual, but I can play her game. She got up on her knees, her head facing Alex's feet and began tracing circles with her fingers around the flat stomach, lingering on the curly mound and then extending her hands down the tight muscular thighs of her lover. She took both her hands and placed one on either thigh as she bent her head down and kissed the soft curls below Alex's abdomen. Alex picked up Samantha's left foot with her left hand and repositioned it on the other side of her own body, causing the smaller woman to straddle her.

"Alex what are you . . ."

"Hush, Samantha."

Samantha hushed.

Sam felt a little strange with the positioning, but her adrenaline was already flowing and the warm body beneath her was more than she could bear. She again positioned herself on her knees and bent down, leisurely tracing her tongue over the entire abdomen before her, her hands finding moistness in between the folds of her lover's lips. But she wanted to taste Alex, not only feel her so she continued moving her face down towards the beckoning portion of her lover's body.

As she was doing so she felt Alex's hands. They came from underneath, gently squeezing her breasts, rolling the hard nipples in between her fingers. She could feel Alex kissing her legs as she pulled Samantha up closer to her face. Hands were all over her, on her stomach, on her buttocks on her legs, *By the Gods, she's inside me*. Fingers found their way slowly in and out of the moist area in front of Alex's face.

Samantha continued to focus on what it was she wanted as she used her tongue to make love to Alex, trying her best not to lose concentration. All the while Alex was exploring Samantha's body, kissing her butt, moving her hands from one area to another. When Samantha was totally

engulfed in satisfying her lover she suddenly felt a warm, soft tongue open the folds of her lips and begin matching movements with her own tongue.

Sam could not believe the depth of the ecstasy running through her body. *What do I do now?* She questioned herself while trying to keep her mind on what she was doing. She didn't know whether to continue trying to please her lover or give way to the sensations of her own body as Alex sucked, licked and touched her seemingly everywhere at once. As the movements of Alex's tongue increased the more excited she became and she found herself following suit. They were in total sync with each other, bodies glistening in the morning sun that was beginning to filter through the windows, muscles tightening, breathing becoming labored.

Letting out a small scream Samantha reached a climax and it seemed that Alex simultaneously had the same reaction.

"Oh, Alex . . ." was all that would emerge from her lips.

Samantha was relaxing, reveling in the moment as Alex turned her over and ended up back on top. "I really need to finish what I started," came the statement from the blue-eyed hero who was now face to face with her beloved. She tenderly slid her hand down Samantha's body, parted the folds beneath the mound and entered her lover, slowly and methodically.

"I love making love to you Samantha," she whispered in her lover's ear as their bodies continued to move in a rhythm generated by desire. "Come again for me. Let me feel you pulsate deep inside. Tell me you want me, my Destiny. Tell me." She purposely slowed her movements with the last statement, waiting for an answer.

"Oh, Alex could there be any doubt? Please Alex, don't stop . . . I want you Alex . . . please . . ."

Alex sped up the rhythm and increased the thrust. Samantha had no trouble satisfying her lover's request. In minutes she was pulsating inside and digging nails into Alex's back as she once again reached a sexual height she had only before merely dreamed of.

Alex flopped down beside her lover, gently brushing back her hair and kissing her softly on the cheek. "So, was that a satisfying reenactment of last night?"

"Reenactment -- that was anything but a reenactment! I've never ever done anything minimally close to that." Green eyes stared lovingly into blue as she smiled at Alex and kissed her.

"Well now, Samantha, you can honestly say you've been "around the world. So . . . how was your trip?"

"Global!" she laughed as she turned towards Alex. "I suppose that now you want me to get up and go to work?"

"But of course -- we just had breakfast so we should be good to go for at least four hours." Alex smiled, kissed Sam on the cheek again and rolled off the bed.



"I'm going to shower -- want to join me?"

"Yeah, but just for a shower -- you promise to behave?"

"Oh, yes. I promise."

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Between the shower and dressing Alex told Sam about her phone call, the call she had made to Aurora and a run down of what they needed to accomplish today. The list was quite long but they figured if they got right on it they would be done at a decent enough hour to maybe go for a swim before the sun went down. Sam threw a couple bagels in the toaster oven and they continued to talk over bagels and juice.

Samantha told Alex she would take all the invitations to the post office since the envelopes had already been stuffed, sealed and stamped. She wanted to see if she could have lunch with Suzanne and fill her friend in on the changes that had occurred in her life in the past week. After lunch she would come back and start calling the subcontractors and staff people who had already been hired.

Alex said she would check with the supervisors on the status of the clinic, put someone in charge of completing the parental suite and figure out who to use for doing the warehouse inspection. She told Sam that she understood about telling Suzanne adding, "That's okay, I'll eat lunch alone," she smiled broadly at her lover when she saw Samantha's face drop at the thought of Alex's feelings being hurt.

"I'm kidding, Samantha. See my smile?" She pointed with both index fingers as she broadened her smile. "Listen, I'll be sending a guy up with the stuff from your car, so we need to figure out where you want it all to go."

"But, Alex -- I don't know where to put it. We haven't talked about that, in fact I haven't even seen all of the upstairs yet."

There was panic in her voice so Alex immediately calmed her down. "Let's do that right now, before I go downstairs, then you can call your little friend and set up your lunch date."

"Come on," she said getting up and waiting for Samantha to follow. They walked out into the hall and for the first time Samantha really took a look at the layout of the top floor. There was one hall running parallel to all the rooms she had been in with doors on either side of it. Halfway down the first hall was a second which ran perpendicular to first and leading east.

Alex talked as they walked, explaining that the parental suite was on the northeast corner of the building. It was situated so as to have a view of Laguna as well as a view of the ocean. On the way to the suite she opened two of the doors on either side of the hall, displaying large empty rooms that could have been used for just about anything.

"Why don't you pick one of these to use as a bedroom, Samantha. They're both large and spacious, the bathroom is right here in the hall. The location is great, and they're far enough away from the suite that your parents wouldn't know if you were in the room or not." She lovingly smiled at Samantha, pulling the small framed woman close and giving her a peck on the cheek. Alex pointed the way and they entered the huge empty room.

"This is a gorgeous room, Alex. I love the skylight. There is so much that can be done with this."

"Well, it's all yours to decorate! Get it all set up to look like you so your family will think you really use it. If it's all furnished we can use it as a guest room and after your parents leave we can move your personal stuff out and into the main apartment." Alex looked at Samantha for her final approval of the room.

"I think this will do just fine." Samantha slowly spun around taking in the entire room. "What if I just put enough in here to make it look like I live in it and use one of the other rooms closer to our living quarters to store all the other stuff?"

"Whatever you want -- it's all your decision. You will have to pick a color for the paint or get paper if you want and then we have to go furniture shopping." Alex twisted her face into a slight grimace as the final word came out.

"I take it shopping is not one of your favorite pastimes?" Samantha replied noticing the change in her lover's face.

"No. It's not something I really relish doing, but it is a necessary evil. Let's go take a look at the suite." Alex pointed further down the hall.

"But Alex, maybe you didn't like shopping before because you didn't have anyone else to share with. It will be fun furnishing the rest of the apartment together, don't you think?"

"I guess I never did look at it that way -- sure -- we'll have a good time fixing the rest of the place up together." Alex smiled at Samantha as she opened the first door to the suite.

Samantha's exuberance over the project of decorating and furnishing the suite and the extra bedroom soon rubbed off on Alex and she found herself getting caught up as they walked from room to room and Samantha described what she could see in her mind's eye. A splash of blue here, a dab of pink there and of course lavender, there was always a place for lavender, in Samantha's opinion. All together there were two baths, two bedrooms and a kitchen/living room combination. There was quite a bit of finalizing to be done in the next nine days to have the suite ready by the open house. All of the structural work was already completed. Alex had put in an off-white Berber carpet throughout the suite with a ceramic tile in the kitchen area. All the appliances had arrived so really what was needed was the final touches of making it look like a home away from home. A good deal of tonight and perhaps tomorrow would be spent on picking out furniture, bedspreads, draperies, a few new light fixtures and of course kitchen equipment. Alex was glad Samantha was around and excited about doing this, it made it seem so much less of a drag. It was hard not to get a little excited with Sam so enthused.

Two decisions had already been cast. Samantha had determined that "her bedroom" would be a pale lavender color and she could accessorize later. With that color there would be no doubt in her mother's mind that the room definitely belonged to her. She also decided that the carpet would be Berber like the suite. Alex promised to order the paint and carpeting today, have a painter from the crew do the room in the morning and have the carpet installed the following day.

The morning was beginning to get away from them so they decided to part company and Alex went down to check on the Clinic.

"I hate having to leave you, even for a little while." Alex gazed down into green gems as she pulled her lover close. "You make doing even the dull stuff, fun!" She bent down and kissed Samantha gently on the lips and smiled as it brought back memories of this morning's "global" experience.

"I feel the same way, but if we don't part company for a little while we will never get anything we need to do accomplished. I'm going to get the invitations like we talked about and call Suzanne. I should probably be back around two o'clock if all goes well. You okay about lunch?" The solemn inquisition in the green eyes made Alex want to smile.

"Yes, honey." Alex took both Samantha's hands in hers and kissed them. "You are such a dear. I'll be just fine. I've missed most of the morning so I'm sure I have a lot to catch up on. You go have fun with your friend." She gave Samantha another quick peck on the cheek as they had reached the elevator and then she stepped inside.

Samantha went back into the kitchen area to call Suzanne and set up an appointment time of 11:30. It was really difficult not to discuss anything of substance over the phone with her gabby friend, but she managed to just get her to meet at the pizza place and told her she would inform her of everything when she got there.

Next on the list was to straighten up from breakfast, what little they had and then fix up the bedroom and living room. With all that accomplished she picked up the bag with the invitations and left the apartment.

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The restaurant was already beginning to get crowded when Samantha arrived. But she got there before Suzanne and was lucky enough to get a table off in a corner. She knew her friend would eat a veggie pizza with her so she went ahead and ordered, getting them each a salad as well. Suzanne didn't keep her waiting long.

"Sam," the redhead exclaimed, rushing up to Samantha, giving her a hug and kiss on the cheek. "Where have you been? What are you doing?"

"Well, hi to you, too," Samantha retorted, hugging the woman back. "Sit down and I'll tell you."

"When I first started calling last week, I thought maybe you were just down at the beach. But, Sammie, I called and called and called and you were never there. I knew you didn't know anyone else in town so I really began to worry."

Samantha looked at her friend and shook her head. "I'm really sorry, Suzanne. Everything happened so quickly, I guess I really didn't think about anything except what I was doing and where I was going. I don't know how to begin . . ."

"Just start -- it's easy!" The waitress came by with their salads and Suzanne ordered a beer.

"I had the opportunity to go to San Francisco for a couple days. I originally thought I would only be gone a couple days, but the trip extended into the weekend. I really didn't think about telling anyone where I was and that was very inconsiderate of me. I'm really sorry."

"Okay," Suzanne said looking strangely at her friend, "I'll bite --- who did you go with and why? And because you're back and in good condition, you're forgiven. Actually you look better than I've seen you look in weeks. What gives?"

"Suz," Samantha slowly began, "I'm in love!"

"You're in What?"

"Yeah, you heard me right -- I'm in love! For the first time in my life and I feel marvelous. I'm head over heels, totally enraptured, silly as a loon -- anything you want to say -- that's me." Samantha confessed.

"So . . . don't keep me in the dark! With who?"

Samantha looked her best friend directly in the eyes and figured the best way to say it was to just come out and say it. "I'm in love with Alexis Dorian." There she had said it and just waited for the ball to drop.

"You know, I've heard rumors about her for quite sometime. They say she has the deepest blue eyes anyone has ever seen . . ."

"Oh, They are right about that . . ."

"But, Samantha," an astonished Suzanne continued, "I didn't think you were a lesbian."

"I didn't know I was a lesbian either, Suz. I don't know how to explain it to anyone so it would make any real sense. It just happened and it was all so natural to me. I really love her." Samantha went on to explain the first meeting and then what had happened the next night on the wall. It felt so good to be able to tell someone how happy she was and how much she loved Alex. She was talking so much the pizza was beginning to get cold. When she finally finished telling all about San Francisco and Sonny and Ray and how great Alex was she felt exhausted.

"Well, when you open up you really open up, girl!" Suzanne smiled at her beaming friend. "I'm glad I'm not the prejudice type, but I do have to admit that the original statement took me back a little." She patted her friend on the hand. "Samantha, I'm truly happy for you. You know someone made a snide comment this morning about Ms. Dorian calling the office on Monday. Something about compensating for taking you away from the company. I thought they were full of shit, but . . ."

"Alex called the office?" Samantha looked astonished. "Why . . ."

"Hey, slow down. I didn't mean to cause trouble in paradise. Didn't you know she called." Suzanne questioned her blonde friend.

"No!" came the adamant response. "She was suppose to let me handle the situation by myself. I thought it went too easily!" Samantha's face took on a slight blush.

"Hey, slow down, Irish. You ought to be happy that someone cares enough about you to take the brunt of the situation. It sounds like she's only trying to take care of you."

"I'm not mad," Samantha confessed, "I just hoped that she had a little more confidence in the fact that I could have handled the situation on my own."

"Listen, Sam, I'm sure she has confidence in you, she was just stacking the deck for you a little. She sounds like a helluva lady! So, when do we meet?"

Samantha looked back at her friend and smiled. "Well, you and Danny are definitely invited to the Open House next Friday. If we can swing a time before then when we all can get together we will. I just know you'll adore her!" Samantha beamed at Suzanne, "I think I'm one of the happiest people in the world at this very minute."

"You certainly look that way," Suzanne agreed. "If you need any help getting your room set up or help with painting or anything like that, I'm available."

"Thank you, Suz. Maybe you could come over one day this week and have lunch with us and meet Alex. How about we set up for lunch on Thursday?" the small blonde asked her friend.

"That's sounds great!" her friend replied. "It's been kinda a slow week so lunch is easy to fit in. I can't wait to meet this perfect person." Suzanne smiled over at the blonde smiling back at her. "You really are all smiles, my friend."

"I'm just so lucky. I can't believe I have finally found my niche in life!"

Suzanne looked down at her watch and told Samantha she needed to get back to work. There wasn't a lot but what there was needed to be finished. She promised to call before Thursday and get a time. The two friends hugged each other and parted company. After paying the tab, Samantha was off to the post office and then back to the Clinic to make some calls. On the way back to the car she did a little window shopping which is almost impossible not to do on the

streets of Laguna and spotted a mother of pearl/abalone ying/yang paperweight in one of the store fronts. It was a must for Alex's desk so of course she bought it and had it wrapped.

She was turning the corner to where she had parked her car when she got the odd sensation that someone was staring at her. Looking across and down the street she could barely make out a slim figure, dressed in black leather. A tall blonde seemed to be intently staring in her direction. *Damn, that face seems familiar. It looks like the woman from the bar up in San Francisco.* She reached in her pocketbook for her sunglasses, thinking she might get a better look. When she looked back up the woman was gone. *Well, now you are being ridiculous, Samantha Riley. She was probably just looking at something in the window you were standing in front of.* She brushed off the feeling and continued to the car.

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"So, how was lunch?" Alex greeted Samantha by the receptionist's desk, grabbed her hand and practically pulled her toward her office.

"Lunch was great," Samantha started to answer as she was being led toward Alex's office.

They got inside and Alex closed the door. "Come here, you." She drew the smaller woman into her arms and gave her a hug, then with her hands on either side of Samantha's face she bent down and kissed her. "The Goddess knows I missed you this morning! I feel empty when you're not around." She kissed Samantha again and ran her hands through the fine, silken hair. "Welcome home."

"I missed you, too, Alex. But you know, I think I have a bone to pick with you."

"Why?" Blue eyes took on a look of contrition, "What did I do?"

"You have to give me credit for being able to handle Some of my own problems, Alex."

"Samantha, I don't understand." The raven-haired beauty stood before her lover with confusion written all over her face.

"You called Flying Fingers before I got a chance to, didn't you?" Samantha accused.

"Who told you that?"

"You know how I found out -- what I want to know is why? Why didn't you trust me enough to let me do it all by myself like I asked. I told you I would have you butt in if it went poorly. Why, Alex?"

"I'm sorry, Samantha. I just didn't want her upsetting you and I knew I could handle the situation much easier. Forgive me? Next time, if we decide it's all in your corner, so be it! I promise!" Alex pleaded with her lover to let this one pass and, of course, Samantha agreed.

"It was great talking to Suz about you." Samantha smiled a wicked smile up at her lover.

"Oh, should I be worried as to exactly what was discussed?" Alex wanted to know.

"Well, she is my best friend and up to now I've had no real secrets from her." Samantha giggled and put her face into Alex's chest. "I just went on and on about how marvelous you are so you'll have a real show to put on when you meet her on Thursday for lunch."

"Thursday for lunch, no asking me -- just telling, huh?" Alex smiled down at the small blonde.

"I knew you wouldn't mind and I'll be doing the making." Samantha gazed up into blue pools that showed nothing but affection for the small blonde they beheld.

"You'll do no such thing," Alex chuckled at her lover. "If I'm to be put on display then we will either go to a very elegant restaurant or have it catered here."

Samantha started to disapprove and was given a quick negative shake of raven hair and a stern stare that stopped her objection in its tracks.

"You can have your choice of which but it **will** be one or the other. If I'm to be made a spectacle of then so be it!" Alex beamed as she looked at Samantha's face. "I love you, Samantha. It will be fun."

"Let's do the catering thing then -- that way Suzanne will be able to see the beautiful view we have from here. No restaurant around can beat our view!" Samantha gleefully agreed to the venture.

"Catered it will be then. Now, what do you have in mind to do for the rest of the afternoon?"

Samantha went on to discuss with Alex the subcontractors who needed to be called.

Alex told Sam what she had done in her absence. She filled her in with information that the police had called and she seemed more than a little concerned that Jake had told them he would love to be able take the blame for breaking in and messing up the VW but that he had not done it. He would not confess to the vandalism and had sneered at the police, telling them that she must be on someone else's shit list as well. The police said he seemed to get a grim satisfaction in the fact that someone else hated her as much as he did.

Alex gave Samantha the list of contacts she needed to make and told her she could either stay in the office or go on up to the apartment to do the calling. Sam opted for the apartment and the gals kissed and went their separate ways.

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Samantha had finalized the last of the subcontractors and was quite content with the outcome of the calls. All but one of the instructors was ready to start and the one that wasn't could easily be

replaced with an alternative discipline. She smiled at her accomplishment and decided to surprise Alex with dinner when she finally got done working. It had been quite a fulfilling day and making dinner was a nice way to top it off. She loved to cook and even though they hadn't been shopping yet she scrounged around and found the makings of a pretty good meal.

She found a nice bottle of Merlot and opened it to let it breathe a little before being served. Dinner would entail a nice salad, baked potato, broccoli and she found a piece of frozen tuna steak that would more than work for the two of them after she marinated and grilled it.

She set the table and decorated it with candles then went through a stack of Alex's CD's and had the player all ready to go. After showering she changed into a midi top and bike shorts. She put the CD player on, poured some wine and sat on a couple pillows in front of the window to wait for Alex. Looking over at microwave clock she saw it was about 6:00. Her day had been quite busy, what with informing her friend about her new life style and talking to all those new people. The music was soothing and she found herself relaxing to the point of nodding off.

When Alex came through the door at 6:30 she heard the soft sounds of one of her favorite jazz artists. She quietly closed the door and went in search of Samantha. All day long she had to wear the guise of boss. She needed to be strong, opinionated and right, especially when dealing with some of the males she ran across who felt obliged to balk at female leadership, even when she was paying their salary. Up here she could let down her guard and relax. She could feel the process begin when she opened the door to the apartment but when she cast her eyes on a sleeping Samantha, her arms wrapped around a large pillow, the tall, dark-haired businesswoman in Alex melted, leaving behind only the soft, caring lover -- the person not many people ever got to see.

Alex squatted down on her knees and kissed Samantha softly on the ear as she whispered, "Good evening, baby."

Samantha opened her eyes and let go her hold of the pillow as she reached up and drew Alex closer. "It's about time you stopped working." The two bodies merged into one as the lovers caressed each other. "As much as I would like to stay here forever, I do have a dinner almost completed. Could I entice you into dining?" Samantha began to get up, pulling Alex up with her.

"I imagine I could stop long enough to eat dinner, as long as I get you for dessert." Alex smiled at the small blonde now standing in front of her. "I'll just go wash up while you finish."

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Dinner was rather uneventful. Each of the women talked about what had transpired since they had parted ways. Sam filled Alex in on all the conversations with the subcontractors and lecturers. Alex explained just how near to completion the entire project was coming. They laughed, ate and drank as the sun did its daily ritual in front of their abode.

As dinner was winding down Alex made the suggestion that they go to the Sawdust Fair on Saturday. She explained that the Fair was where she had originally intended to take Samantha



last weekend before the San Francisco trip turned up. She went on to explain that the summer festival took place in a three-acre eucalyptus grove in Laguna canyon, and that it continued through the entire months of July and August.

"This Fair is unique to Laguna, Samantha, over 180 artists from all disciplines come together for this event each year as they have since the early 1960's. Mom and Kelley used to bring me here when I was little. It started out with a bunch of disgruntled artists who were out to show the establishment that they didn't have to follow guidelines to be true artisans. Coming to the Fair was one of our family traditions."

"Was a tradition? That sounds like it isn't any more." Samantha looked up questioningly at her lover. "Did you stop going?"

"Yeah." Alex answered with a sigh. "I guess the tradition stopped when I started college. It's kind of a shame, it was always a fun time." She gave Samantha a quick hug.

"Maybe we can start it up again, Alex. It might be fun."

"That's sweet, honey. Maybe we can. Mom would probably like that!"

"So, do you still want to go swimming?" Samantha asked. "After the kitchen gets cleaned up."

"No," came the response from the tired executive. "But, I would like to take a short walk on the beach." She picked up some of the plates off the table and started into the kitchen.

"I can handle this, Alex."

"Well, the least I can do is clear the table off."

"Okay," Samantha gave in, "It will make it faster if you clear and I clean."

In less than 15 minutes they were out the door -- not without locking it first -- and headed down toward the shoreline.

"Hey, Samantha, I forgot to tell you that the beach signs arrived today. I'll have someone put them up tomorrow. What do you think about putting fencing up?"

Samantha looked at her lover and frowned slightly, "I think I would rather not put up fencing unless we begin to find it necessary. I love the way the beach looks in its continuity. No sense in spoiling the view if we don't have to."

"My thoughts exactly," Alex smiled down at the small blonde.

Looking down the long expanse of beach took Alex back to other happy times she had spent on this plot of land. "You know, we're going to have to go grunion hunting sometime this summer, I haven't been for years!"

"I thought that was a California legend." Samantha stated.

"No. Grunions are as real as sharks but a lot more fun to play with. We'll have to call the Maritime people and see when the next run is scheduled; it should be anytime now." She looked over at the small woman by her side and drew her in closer. "There are so many things I want to do with you, Samantha. You've brought excitement back into my life and I can't seem to sit still anymore." She stopped walking long enough to kiss Samantha gently and hold her close. "Look around, honey, this is where we belong. No matter where else we go or what else we do, we'll always have this to come home to." She felt the small woman in her arms shiver and held her close. "Come, on let's go back up to the house."

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The rest of the evening continued along uneventfully. They looked at furniture to complete Sam's office, furniture for the parental suite and furniture for Samantha's so-called bedroom. Even though it was only catalogue shopping they pretty much decided on most of the pieces and Alex said she would call in the order in the morning. They had also found a white sectional couch for the living room with a middle that pulled out into a double bed and two matching recliners that could sit close or sit separate from the completed couch. If anything was not as displayed in the catalogue there would be no problem with sending it back. Samantha wanted to look for some glass top tables to go with the couch and Alex suggested that they look around at the Fair on Saturday. With all those decisions out of the way the only shopping left was for linens and accessories. Alex told Sam to feel free to go do the shopping one day early next week with Suzanne if she wanted, stating that shopping was not her most favorite chore. Samantha laughed at the term "chore" applied to shopping and said she would ask Suz if she wanted to help her spend some money.

They talked a little while longer as they sat and watched the ocean below them rise and fall and the moon dance on the white caps. Samantha was the first to suggest bed and it didn't take any coaxing for Alex to agree.

"It's been quite a day," Alex stated looking over at Sam while she was undressing. "How do you think you're going to like working with me?"

"I'm going to like it just fine, Alex," came the immediate response. "At least I know it will never be dull!" She smiled over at her lover.

"Just how long do you think that nightshirt you're putting on is going to stay on?" Alex grinned.

"Probably not long, I guess it isn't really even worth the bother, now is it?" The small blonde shook her head and proceeded to take the nightshirt back off as she hopped into the bed.

"Better?"

"Much!" Came the answer from a naked Alex who immediately got into the other side of the bed.

"This is definitely the only way to end a busy day." She pulled the small blonde close to her, the heat from their radiating bodies igniting the fire of passion once again. The soft music still emanating from the living room added a perfect background for the two lovers as they exhausted themselves in the sweetest way possible and ended up falling asleep, wrapped in each other's arms.

Continued in Part 13.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 13

### Chapter 13

In anticipation of the weekend and the Festival, the next few days seemed to fly by. Wednesday being the least busiest of the three and Thursday turning out to be the most hectic.

Wednesday was spent mostly with Samantha overseeing the painting and papering of the rooms upstairs and talking to a few of the contract therapists who wanted to know if they could come and see the clinic before the open house. She set appointments to meet with them and personally

show them around in the coming week. Alex continued to work with the crews and took care of the little details that still needed looking after. Everything was coming together quickly and the anticipated date was drawing close.

The evening was spent quietly taking a walk on the beach after dinner which seemed to have turned into a nightly routine. The walk afforded them the luxury of a little exercise while they talked about the time spent apart during the day. If the walk didn't wear them down enough to sleep well during the night the passionate antics directly before sleep did. Exploration was still the theme in their sex life and Samantha was definitely a quick study. She loved touching Alex and took great satisfaction in being able to break down what others saw as the tough veneer of her lover. To others Alex always seemed so in control and on top of everything. Samantha got to see a side to Alex that others never did and she loved that part of her lover. She saw the Alex who could melt at a touch and weep at a feeling. Deep down inside she was thrilled that Alex didn't show her tender side to everyone, it made her feel special to know that she alone could bring out this tender, caring side to her lover.

Alex had called one of her favorite restaurants on Wednesday to set up the catered luncheon for Thursday and like everything else Alex did for Samantha, it was a huge success. Alex had ordered lobster, shrimp and crab platters with assorted veggies on the side and a dessert tray that would have put extra pounds on anyone just by looking at it. Alex was her most pleasant of selves and charmed Suzanne with smiles and small talk. Samantha was very impressed and that evening she made sure that her lover was well rewarded for showing her friend such a good time.

Furniture had begun arriving on Thursday as well and part of the crew spent most of the afternoon arranging and rearranging pieces in the parental suite and in Samantha's "bedroom." Samantha had originally had a layout for each and every room, but as she saw the furniture being placed she, of course, tended to occasionally change her mind, as was her prerogative. The men on the other end of the heavy pieces were, naturally, of a different mind set but they were, after all being paid no matter what it was they were doing. There was very little complaining and all went fairly smoothly.

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"So, my little decorator," Alex smiled at Samantha, "how are the projects coming along?" She looked around the living room in the suite and smiled. "I think my Mom will really like this room. Actually, Samantha, I think your taste is similar to Mom's." She walked over and gave the small blonde a hug. "Show me around."

Samantha was feeling quite proud of her accomplishment. It was the first time she ever had the opportunity to decorate an entire suite and she was having the time of her life. "Well, as you can see the living room is all finished. I think the light furniture we decided on goes really well with the openness of the rooms. Alex, I just love the little waterfall you had delivered." They walked from room to room and Alex complimented Samantha on the way the rooms seemed to flow into one another.

"Tomorrow Suzanne and I are going to do some shopping for small things like the silverware, dishes, glasses and the bathroom items -- you know -- towels, soap dishes, stuff like that." Samantha smiled up at Alex with a twinkle in her eyes. "You're more than welcome to come with us if you want."

"I think I'll pass," came the reply from the dark-haired beauty smiling down at Samantha. "You girls go and have a good time. This place is really coming into its own, Samantha. It looks great."

As they walked over to the apartment Alex suggested that they go out to dinner instead of cooking. "What do you say we call it a day? The crews are gone and we are finally alone. I think you deserve a nice dinner out."

"Sounds great, where did you have in mind?" Samantha asked.

"There's a small restaurant off the Coast Highway with a great view and a beautiful rose garden, I thought we might give it a try. I'll call for reservations." Alex headed for the phone while Samantha went in to start filling the Jacuzzi.

*If we're going to make an evening of it, we might as well start with a nice bubbling bath.* She thought as she poured in the foaming liquid. "Are you coming or am I going to have this entire tub to myself?"

"Not on your life," came the response as Alex entered the bathroom and stripped, joining Samantha in the warm bubbles. "Don't you ever let it be known how much I enjoy these bubbles, you hear me? It will totally ruin my reputation." The taller woman smiled as she inched over closer to her lover.

"We wouldn't want that, now would we," came the answer from Samantha as she lathered up a bath puff and proceeded to soap Alex up. "I won't let it be known that you enjoy being pampered either." She smiled up at her lover, stretched up and kissed her firmly on the lips.

"I really want to thank you, Alex, for the lovely lunch you put on for Suzanne. It really made her feel important and she got to see your very best side." Samantha gave her lover a wet hug as she continued washing Alex.

"I enjoyed doing it, honey. Anything to make you happy. It was a little weird though, being the center of attention for the entire hour and a half she was here. She seems like a really nice person, Samantha. I'm glad you have someone you can relate to and I'll always be grateful to her for bringing you down to Laguna. If it wasn't for your friend, we might never have met. But then again there's that Destiny thing isn't there?" Alex smiled down at Samantha and took the puff from her to reciprocate the washing.

"Hey, just wash like I did. No fair getting frisky! We have a dinner to go to, remember?" Samantha squealed as she pulled away from the puff that was doing more than just washing her skin. She grinned and directed a splash at the perpetrator holding the puff.

"Okay, okay!" Alex smiled holding up her hands, "You can't fault a gal for trying." She smiled at Samantha as she began rinsing the other woman off. "Dinner first, dessert later tonight!"

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Dinner was elegant with a view that almost matched the one at the apartment. The lovers decided that a walk around the small town afterward would be interesting. They window-shopped and Alex was glad that most of the shops were already closed as Samantha would have spent a small fortune with the things she pointed out that she absolutely loved.

"Remind me Not to bring you down here when the shops are open." Alex laughed as she steered Samantha away from a window containing all varieties of fairies and gnomes.

"Alex, I'm just saying what I like, that doesn't mean I would buy it all. Don't you know that window shopping is half the fun?"

"I guess I don't. I usually purchase that which catches my eye." Alex responded to the question. "You about ready to go home?"

"Just about, I would love to have a waffle ice cream cone before we do, how 'bout you?" Samantha looked pleadingly at Alex.

"Sure, why not." Alex gave in.

Because the ice cream shop was right on the Coast Highway they walked across the street and sat on the beach to eat their ice cream.

"I talked to my Mom this afternoon, Alex." Samantha began. "She said they'll be down the week following the open house. They'll be staying from Friday to Monday. Do you think you'll be able to take a four-day visit?"

"I'm sure I'll survive. How taxing can it be; they're your parents." Alex smiled in the direction of her lover.

"Oh, Alex -- they are nothing like me! Except maybe my sister. Mom is really anxious to meet you. She can't believe that a single woman would be the owner of an establishment such as Alternative Paradise and be able to function totally on her own without a man around to help." Samantha cringed a little at the completion of the last statement.

"Well, then, she'll be a challenge for me won't she?" Alex put her arm around her lover and drew her closer. "We'll manage fine. Don't worry about it ahead of time, you'll just make the situation more than it really is. Didn't you learn anything from Mom's tapes?" Alex smiled and gave Samantha a kiss on the cheek.

"Yes, actually I did learn that and I need to remember to keep up my affirmations and positive thinking! It's just that I have never kept anything from my parents before, especially not

something as life changing as You." Samantha buried her head in Alex's chest and received a hug and kiss on the top of her head. "I guess I'm a little scared, Alex. I can't seem to help it," she murmured into the taller woman's chest.

"Samantha, we'll get through this with flying colors. Have a little faith in us and in your parents, too. You know they love you. Come on now, shake it off -- that's an order!" Alex held Samantha out from her and stared into scared green eyes. "Samantha -- I don't know what else to say, honey. All I can suggest is that you try to put it out of your mind until they get here and we will deal with it then." Alex was totally at a loss, she was not used to feeling so helpless and did not like it one bit.

Samantha looked up into sapphire orbs that showed great concern. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be getting you all upset over this. You're right, no sense worrying about it. I will just have to deal with it when they get here. Let's go home."

"Good idea."

The ride home was short and quiet, as was the ride up in the elevator. It seemed that each of the women was lost in her own thoughts with only an occasional burst from Samantha about something she had forgotten to tell Alex that had happened earlier in the day.

When they reached the living room Alex turned around to face Samantha. "Guess it's time for dessert," she said with a twinkle in her blue eyes.

"What do you mean dessert? We just finished a huge waffle cone, did you forget already?" came the reply from the blonde now in her arms.

"No, I didn't forget -- but it seems you did. Before we left for dinner, in the tub, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Samantha said with a twinkle in her eyes. "I do seem to recall something being said about dessert after dinner but . . ."

"No buts about it, little lady. I still have a craving that needs some attention . . . of course I could go looking elsewhere for dessert . . ."

"Over my dead body," the smaller woman responded before the sentence had a chance to be finished. "The only dessert you'll ever need is standing directly in front of you." She reached up and kissed Alex passionately, letting her hands wander over the taller woman's body.

Alex picked Samantha up and tenderly carried her into the bedroom where they took turns undressing one another, stopping only long enough for a kiss here and a caress there. They made love without the enhancement of candles and without the soft tones of music. Music and candles were mere trimmings, background mood setters, reinforcements when planned out in advance but unnecessary trappings to accompany the almost magical act of making love. The two lovers required nothing to intensify the moment, they brought with them all that was needed . . . their bodies, their lips, their hands. All they desired to be to each other was wrapped up in the person

each of them was, and no outside stimulus was necessary to enjoy the love that was growing with every passing day. Soft murmurs of passion gave way to exclamations of euphoria and finally to the soft rhythmical breathing of two lovers asleep in each other's arms, totally drained and completely satisfied.

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Friday was spent with Alex in the Clinic and Samantha out spending money on incidentals needed for the finishing touches on the suite, the bathrooms and the extra bedroom. She and Suzanne had quite a day buying things that they usually only window-shopped for. Occasionally Samantha would get a twinge of guilt for spending so much money all at one time but then she would remember Alex's words . . . *Get whatever you think will make the suite a home away from home and fix the extra bedroom up just the way you would like to have it if it were really your room -- spare no expense, Samantha and have a good time.* They came home laden with goods. Samantha was a natural-born bargain shopper so they ended up spending less money for more products.

Sam and Suz spent the rest of the afternoon putting all the stuff on, in and around where it belonged. They made the beds, put up curtains, put away dishes and silverware, decorated the baths and just generally put the finishing touches on all the rooms. The time flew by and at seven o'clock Alex came into the suite, pizza box in one hand, six pack of beer in the other.

"I thought maybe you two decorators would like to take a break and eat. I'm surprised that Samantha isn't passed out on the floor famished!" She smiled over at her lover and raised the pizza box and beer.

"Alex, how thoughtful . . ." Samantha exclaimed.

"Thoughtful had nothing to do with it, self-preservation did -- I'm hungry!" Alex laughed as she put the box and carton down on the kitchen table. "Why don't we just christen this suite right now with its first dinner?"

"Great idea," Suzanne chimed in. "Now that I've stopped for a minute, I can feel my stomach acting like my throat has been cut. It must have been almost seven hours ago since we last ate." She walked over to the counter and got a handful of napkins. "Anyone want a plate and a glass or shall we rough it?"

"Let's just rough it tonight," Samantha answered. "No sense making more of a mess than we need to." She turned to Alex and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "We're just about finished here. I think we really got a lot accomplished today. We'll give you the full tour after we eat."

Alex opened a beer for each of them and raised her bottle to toast. "Here's to a successfully finished project."

"Here, here," came the reply from the other two women sitting at the table with her.



It didn't take long for the three of them to make short work of the meal and Samantha filled Alex in on all they had done during the day. Alex *oooo'd* and *ahhhh'd* in all the right places as Samantha and Suzanne took her around each of the rooms they had so painstakingly decorated.

"Looks like all is a go up here on the third floor," she finally acknowledged. "The first and second floors are pretty much squared away, also."

"Listen, I think I'll get going," Suzanne interjected during a moment of silence. "It's been a really busy day for me. I had a great time, Samantha. Anytime you want to spend money again, you know where to find me."

"You betcha!" Samantha smiled at her friend.

"Thanks for dinner, Alex." Suzanne looked over at the dark-haired woman and smiled.

"You're more than welcome. Thanks for keeping Samantha company and helping her get everything in its place."

They walked Suzanne to the front door and watched her leave.

"So, you up to a swim this evening?" Alex asked Samantha as Suzanne's car drove out of sight.

"Yeah, that sounds like fun, we haven't been swimming for a while. Suits though, okay?" Samantha giggled at Alex.

"If you insist," came the reply from her lover.

By the time they got down to the shoreline it was close to nine o'clock and the temperature had dropped quite a bit. It was a little chilly to be swimming so they settled for a long walk along the beach with the water lapping at their ankles. Samantha began to shiver as the wind picked up, causing the waves to break at a faster speed. Alex held her closer and suggested it was time to turn around and go back to the house. When they were about 300 yards from the stairs Alex turned around staring in the direction they had just come from.

"What's the matter, Alex?"

"I don't know, probably nothing. It's just the feeling that someone is watching us. Sounds crazy, doesn't it?" Alex gave Samantha a gentle squeeze. "Nothing to worry about, just my imagination running overtime."

"But if you get the feeling . . ." Samantha stammered.

"Forget it, Samantha. The feeling's gone now anyway. But, I do have a surprise waiting for you back up at the apartment." She quickened her pace and Samantha did her best to keep up.

"What?"

"You'll see when we get there."

"Alex . . ."

"When we get there."

With the anticipation of a surprise the trip back to the apartment did not take very long. All the while Samantha tried to get what the surprise was out of Alex -- to no avail.

Samantha stood in the middle of the living room, hands on her hips, directly in front of Alex, "Okay, here we are -- where's the surprise."

"Damn Samantha, I probably should have kept my mouth shut until we got here, it really is not as big a deal as it seems to have gotten blown into." Alex walked over to the counter in the kitchen and picked up a folder. She walked back over to Samantha and handed it to her.

Samantha gave Alex a questioning look as she took the folder from her lover and began to open it. The top sheet of paper was an exact duplicate of the front doors. Each sheet following contained a definition of one of the designs on the door.

"You kept bugging me about the designs on the doors and I kept putting you off until I had a chance to track down the initial layout. I didn't want you to think that I had forgotten about it. It's just that we have been so busy up to this point and . . ."

"Thank you, Alex." Samantha opened the folder and began looking through the designs. "I hadn't forgotten about the doors either, I just didn't want to keep pestering you about them. Will you sit down with me and go over these?"

Alex walked into the kitchen and got down two goblets, "Sure, want a glass a wine?"

"Yes, please." Samantha sat down and thumbed through the papers on her lap while waiting for Alex to come back into the room.

"So, what I really wanted to know was why you chose the symbols you did and just a little about the ones I am unfamiliar with." Samantha began as Alex sat down next to her on the couch.

"Hey, this is nice -- sitting on something other than the floor for a change, what'd ya think?"

"Very comfortable," the small blonde smiled up at her lover, "hopefully we can find a couple tables tomorrow at the Festival." She flipped the papers back to the beginning and pointed at the first symbol.

"Okay, I definitely know this one -- it's the ying/yang, symbol of cosmic balance, good/evil and all that, right?"

Alex took the paper and began to explain in depth the thoughts behind the door. "Yes, Samantha, that's right but what I was really trying to do with the doors was show more than one of the ancient universal symbols of unity, balance and harmony -- finding a similar symbol in more than one culture. I used the ying/yang as the basic design because it was the symbol I most relate to." She pointed to the pentagram next. "This stands for all the elements, air, fire, water and earth as well as spirit and some feel the symbol is the sign of new beginnings which is exactly what Alternative Paradise is for me and now for you, too." Flipping over the pages Alex came to the crosses. "There are a variety of crosses on the door, the Magen David or star of David, the Christian cross and the Triskelion which is of the Drudic age and stands for good fortune, rolling eternally on swift feet."

"You put quite a bit of thought into this door. It seems like it's a kind of protector, a shield against any negativity entering the building and thus your life." Samantha pondered as she studied the symbols Alex pointed out and explained.

"That's exactly what I was hoping for when I designed it," Alex agreed with her lover. "Look here, this is the symbol for the ancient sound of Om. It is the sound of primal energy, the sound of the universe unto itself. Some say that Om is the Sanskrit symbol of enlightenment, so I felt it belonged on the doors as well."

"Okay, Alex, I think we've covered just about everything except for the two ladies -- and they are?" She snuggled closer to Alex and pointed at the two female figures, one on each of the doors.

"This one is the Goddess Isis, of Egyptian history. I was always fascinated by her because she seemed to be a woman of great power and she was a great magician. Also, on the figure of the Goddess is the Isis knot which reminds me of the ankh symbolizing life and welfare." She pointed on the paper to the other door. "The Goddess on this door is the Greek Goddess Artemis. When you stop to think about it, these two Goddesses compliment each other." Samantha looked again at the drawing of the doors, and Alex went on to explain the ying/yang of the two Goddesses.

"You see, Samantha," Alex continued, "Artemis is the Goddess of the Moon, Stars and the Hunt while Isis is the maker of the sunrise, the light-giver of heaven. That way I had the entire day taken care of with one on one door and one on the other." She smiled at Samantha and gave her a hug. "This may sound a little silly but do you remember watching Wonder Woman when you were growing up?"

"I don't think I watched her a lot, but I do remember seeing the show on occasion, why?"

"If I remember correctly, I think Wonder Woman was somehow connected to Isis and I think that must have stuck with me. I always loved the show. I just didn't like the idea that she always tried to make that stupid Steve seem so smart. Thank the Goddess the heroines of today's shows have come into their own." She laughed as she looked down at the drawing of the two Goddesses.

"Well, you seem to have covered all aspects of life, love and wealth and you have two very strong female protectors." Samantha added. "If I remember my history correctly, Isis was also known as the lady of abundance and renewed wealth."

"That's right and to top everything off Artemis was also the protector of women and bearer of justice. I am also partial to her Labrys (double-bladed ax) as it was originally used by the Scythian Amazon warriors and I have always been fascinated by stories of the Amazons."

"Well, those are very busy doors and they certainly have their work cut out for them," Samantha smiled at Alex and closed the folder on her lap. "I'm glad I finally got to have my curiosity satisfied with explanations of all the figures. Thanks Alex."

Looking at her watch Alex told Samantha she was glad they found the time to go over the doors. It was fun going back over the reasons why she had chosen the symbols and figures. She then mentioned that they had an extremely busy day ahead of them tomorrow. She had all intentions of waking Samantha up when she woke up and if that was going to happen, they had best be getting some sleep.

The combination of shopping, putting goods away, beach walking and wine had totally exhausted Samantha and she was asleep before Alex got through in the bathroom and into bed. Alex climbed in next to the rhythmically breathing woman and wrapped her arm around her. She had gotten used to sleeping intertwined with the small figure lying beside her and it made her feel secure. She thought back on the conversation of the evening and the two Goddesses two floors below them protecting them from harm and embracing their femininity. She smiled to herself and silently thanked her Mom and Kelley for raising her to be a strong woman. She was blessed and as she looked out and gazed at the slowly descending moon she also thought back to the ancient times of the Amazons and gave thanks to Artemis for letting the moon shine down upon her and for protecting her home.

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"No, no, no," came the ranting from the disheveled blonde on the bed as she pulled the covers up over her head. "It can't be time to get up yet, the sun isn't even up."

"Sure it is," came the reply from the raven-haired beauty standing over her getting ready to once again pull the covers back. "The sun is up on the other side of the building, but take my word for it, it is up. Now, you come on and get up, too!"

"Alex, it's Saturday!" The plea was lost on deaf ears.

"I don't care, if you want to get to the Festival before the crowd is unmanageable, we had best leave within the hour." Alex tried reasoning with the small figure curled up in a ball in the bed.

"I don't care if the crowd is unmanageable," came the response.

"Well, I do. Come on, Samantha -- you've had enough sleep. Please get up." The taller woman leaned over the bed, pulled the covers down just enough to unveil an ear and whispered into it, "I will definitely make it worth your while this evening if you get your butt out of bed right this minute." She finished her sentence and accentuated the promise with kisses as her tongue drew little circles around the exposed ear.

"Okay -- you've definitely got my attention and now more areas of my body are standing up than I would care to account for." Samantha pushed off the spread and threw her arms around Alex's neck, drawing her down onto the bed with her. "Do you want to make good on your promise Before we go?" Samantha asked with an impish grin.

Alex breathed a heavy sigh and forced herself to answer in the negative. "No, my darling -- Festival first -- Samantha later."

Samantha just smiled and got out of bed. Within the hour they were ready to walk out the door.

"Now you promise there will be food there?" Samantha quizzed her lover. "Do you know how dangerous it is to take me out of the house hungry?"

"I can just imagine," came the reply, "but it's really a very short trip and then you can nibble to your heart's desire, I promise."

"In that case," the small blonde responded, "I'm ready, let's go."

True to her word, it was a short trip to the Festival Grounds where activity was already in full gear.

"Oh, look," Samantha exclaimed, "it's like a little village."

"Yeah, they build it anew every year so it's never the same two years in a row."

They began walking down the path between the buildings and the eucalyptus trees. Samantha insisted on stopping at each of the displays to examine each new artist's talent. It wasn't long before they passed by a food booth and the morning was complete.

Alex got Samantha's attention as she held up a flower wreath, "Look at this Samantha. It looks like it was made by your favorite little people. Here, try it on." She put the wreath on the flaxen head of her lover and stood back to admire the way it looked. "You look like a fairy queen."

"That's me, Queen Samantha," Samantha made a gesture indicating that Alex should bow.

"I wouldn't go quite that far," Alex smiled as she paid for the wreath. "Come on, want to try your hand at some of the "hands on" workshops?"

"That sounds like a lot of fun!" Samantha agreed with enthusiasm.

They made tee-shirts, tried their skill at carving and even did a sand art project. Alex had to buy a bag just to carry around the little stuff they had made. Aurora had definitely been right about bringing Samantha here; it was a huge success. They stopped for lunch and sat by the waterfall that graced the 3-acre affair as they watched jugglers and magicians entertain the passers by.

"Alex this is great, and I'm glad we got here early." She smiled over at her lover and then gave her a hug. "Thanks for bringing me."

"You're very welcome, but we still need to look around for some tables. I know there are some stained glass booths and some table artisans here, there always are, we just need to continue looking. Let's try up in this direction."

Alex began walking up the path with Samantha lagging slightly behind, continuing to look into each booth as she passed and letting Alex get further and further ahead of her, unaware that her fair-haired lover was falling behind.

Sam couldn't resist stepping into a booth with fired clay candleholders that looked like tree trunks with faces. She found a particular female character labeled The Heroine of Niguel and she just could not do without it. The holder was both rustic and regal at the same time and held a votive in the center. The figure had sapphire glass eyes that reminded Samantha of Alex's and the light from the candle would shine through the eyes creating a great atmosphere.

Coming out of the booth Samantha seemed to trip over a tree root. Just as she was about to land with both hands outstretched on the ground she was caught by two strong arms that prevented her from reaching her destination. She immediately thought it was Alex and began to respond but found she was far from right when she looked up into twinkling brown eyes that held a glint of menace behind the smile on the pleasant face. "Oops, gotta watch the footwork little lady. Here, let me give you a hand."

"Why, thank you -- I feel so . . ." Samantha was regaining her composure and a strong sense of recognition told her that she had seen this person before. "I know you," she said then rephrased her statement, "Well, I don't really know you, but I've seen you before. Who are you? You keep showing up in very strange places."

"Me?" The tall blonde pointed to herself, looking taken back by the statement of familiarity-- "I don't think we've ever met, but that could be rectified very easily." Again she gave the menacing smile that Samantha was having a hard time reading.

"No!" Samantha insisted, "I've seen you before. Are you following me for some reason?"

"Well, aren't we the paranoid one?" Came the snide reply. "What makes you think I would want to follow a complete stranger around?"

Samantha was about to make another comment when she looked around the stranger and spotted a not too happy Alex coming back in her direction.

The tall brown-eyed woman with the intimidating smile caught Samantha's glance and quickly looked in the same direction. "Oh, well, you know I would love to stay . . . but . . . gotta go!" Before Samantha could say another word the tall blonde stranger had disappeared again as quickly as she had arrived.

"What do you think you're doing?" was the first thing out of Alex's mouth, actually before she even completely reached Samantha.

"Right now, I'm resettling myself from an almost disastrous fall," came the response from the small framed woman as she picked up her package and examined it for any damage.

"You scared the Hell out of me. I thought I'd lost you." Alex continued, "What do you mean an almost disastrous fall?"

"I'm sorry, Alex. I stopped for a minute in this shop here and coming out I tripped. I almost landed on the ground but this stranger caught me."

"What stranger?" The dark-haired woman standing in front of her wanted to know as she looked around at nothing but strangers.

"She's gone!" Samantha replied.

Alex surveyed the area and saw no single female who looked as if she might have just finished helping Samantha from a fall. "She?" was the only word that came out of Alex's mouth.

"Yes, she!" Samantha said almost bitterly. "I've seen her before and . . ." she looked around to find the tree root she had tripped over and found none in sight. "if I wanted to really sound paranoid, I would swear that she tripped me before catching my fall. There's nothing to trip over here." Samantha looked up at Alex totally confused. "I thought I tripped over a tree root."

"Why would a complete stranger want to trip you, Samantha? I mean I heard of some smooth ways of trying to get someone's attention, but tripping them and then saving them from a fall . . . that's going a little far, even for your imagination, don't ya think?" Alex smiled in Samantha's direction.

Samantha would have none of the levity. "No, Alex! I don't think this is funny. I've seen that woman before. She followed me home from your place on the first night we met and I think she's the same woman I saw up in San Francisco at that bar when you left me alone."

"You never said anything about a woman following you." Alex responded. "Nor did you say anything about a woman at the bar. Why didn't you tell me this before, Samantha?"

"Maybe because I didn't think it was any big deal," came the response from the small blonde. "I wasn't even sure until just now that it was the same woman."

Standing in front of her lover with her hands on Samantha's shoulders she asked what the stranger looked like, fearing what the answer would be.

"She was about your height and slender with blonde hair and brown eyes that almost seem threatening when you look into them," came the answer from the smaller woman.

"Damn!" was the only reply from Alex as she searched the area for a trace of the woman Samantha just finished describing.

"What?" Samantha queried.

"Never mind. Come on, let's stay together for the rest of the afternoon, shall we?" Alex put her arm around Samantha's shoulder and began walking back up the way she had come.

For the first time ever, Samantha moved her shoulders away from the arm draped over them.  
"Alex -- don't."

"Don't what?" came the innocent question.

"Don't treat me like a child. Do you know who the woman was?" Green eyes stared into blue not flinching as she demanded an answer to her question.

"Samantha, I think I know who it was and I need to take care of her myself," came the solemn retort from the taller woman.

"Why do you feel it's your job to take care of everything? I can take care of myself, you know. I did it for quite a while before I met you." Samantha's Irish was acting up and she was beginning to lose control of her temper.

"If it's who I think it is, you are only a target because of me, so that makes it my responsibility to settle the situation."

"Alex, I'm not going another step with you until we have this settled between us. Who do you think this person is and why do you think she's shadowing me?" Samantha held her ground, hands on her hips, legs slightly apart in the stance of a stubborn child."

Alex almost laughed at her lover but didn't want to aggravate the smaller woman anymore than she already was. "Samantha, I think the person you keep running into or seeing is Nikki. I thought we were done with all this nonsense but it seems that she's started up with it again and I'm the only one who can stop it."

"Nikki -- is that what Nikki looks like? Well, I'm impressed! But . . . why would she be trying to frighten me?" Samantha wanted to know.

"It may just be her way of getting to me, Samantha. I really need to take care of this without involving you. Please try to understand that this is something I have to do by myself." She



stepped over to Samantha and put her arms around the smaller woman's waist. "Please, Honey, let's not fight. Do you realize this is the first time we have had words with each other? I really don't like the way it makes me feel." She bent down and kissed Samantha gently on the lips. "Samantha, please. Don't let Nikki ruin this day for us. I'll call her later and take care of everything -- I promise."

The sun shining on Alex's face made her eyes seem the color of the afternoon sky as they twinkled and promised her lover to take care of the situation. Samantha could not resist smiling back at Alex and returning her kiss. She could not bring herself to remain angry with the tall dark-haired beauty standing in front of her almost pouting like a disappointed child. "Okay, Alex. You take care of the situation, I trust you."

"Good," Alex smiled and once again placed her arm around her lover's shoulders as she marched her in the direction of the table people she had found further up the path.

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful except for the fact that they did find tables for the living room. Glass topped, just as Samantha had envisioned, with carved images of dolphins done in driftwood for the large table and otters that held up the two smaller tables for either side of the couch. Samantha was thrilled and Alex beamed with pride at seeing that she had found just what her lover wanted. Alex made arrangements to have the tables delivered on Monday morning. The living room would be complete before her Mother arrived on Thursday. Before leaving the Festival grounds they stopped and listened to some of the musicians, watched a few more of the magicians and of course decided on having dinner out in the open under the eucalyptus trees. All in all, except for the one incident, the day was marvelous and a complete success.

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"I'm going to call Nikki and see if I can meet with her. Will you be okay here alone?" Alex asked with concern in her tone.

"Of course I will Alex -- are you sure you don't want me to go with you? I can just sit in the car and wait?" The question was as much a plea to tag along as it was just an attempt to be there as support for Alex. She wasn't sure she liked the idea of Alex meeting with Nikki alone. It was a new emotion for her but what she thought she might be feeling was a slight tinge of jealousy. What if Nikki made a pass at Alex and . . . *Get a Grip, girl! You've got to be able to trust Alex or this will never work!*

"No, Honey." Alex kneeled before Samantha as she sat on the couch. "This will go much easier and quicker if it's just Nikki and me. I'll be back as soon as I can." She got up and walked over to the kitchen phone and dialed the number she knew better than her own. Two rings and the all too familiar voice of her ex-lover came through the phone line.

"Hello."

"Hello, Nikki. It's me, Alex."

The voice on the other end of the line paused momentarily and then resumed with . . . "Hi, Alex - long time no hear. What's up?"

"Nikki, do you think the two of us might be able to get together in a little while? There's something I want to discuss with you." Alex tried her best to keep her composure so as not to alarm the woman on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, sure. I've nothing better to do tonight. Want to give me a hint as to what this little meeting is all about?" Nikki asked.

"No -- I'd just like to talk to you, in person," came the ambivalent response.

"Well, Alex" Nikki concluded, "You know where I live. I'll have the Dos Equis waiting." The phone line went dead.

Alex replaced the receiver on the cradle and walked into the living room to Samantha. She sat down beside the smaller woman and took her in her arms. "I'll only be gone a short time. You lock up as soon as I leave. I love you Samantha." She gave Samantha a hug and a kiss and got up to leave.

Samantha grabbed Alex's hand as she stood up from the couch and stood herself, looking deep into the eyes that had captured her heart from the very beginning. "Please be careful tonight, Alex and remember that I love you, too." She looked toward the ocean to keep from letting Alex see the fear in her eyes that Alex may still find a spark of desire for her ex-lover when she went back into familiar surroundings.

Alex sensed that something more than just her leaving was bothering Samantha and she tried to vanquish any fears that her new lover might have about her going to visit Nikki. "Samantha -- it's been over between Nikki and me for a very long time. There is nothing between us. She could never take your place." She tilted the smaller woman's face so she could look into the misty emerald eyes. "Samantha, no one will ever take your place. I love you. You have to trust me, My Destiny. This is just something I have to do." She held the blonde close and kissed her on the top of her head. "I'll be home to you as soon as I can." Samantha felt the strong arms that made her feel so secure release their hold on her and she turned back around to the window and watched through the reflection as Alex walked out the door.

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Alex pulled into the driveway and got out of the car. Before she even had a chance to knock on the door, it was opened and Nikki stood looking back at her.

"Come on in, stranger." Nikki motioned for Alex to pass her and enter the house.

"This is not a social visit, Nikki," Alex began.

"Oh, Alex -- I've so missed your social graces." Nikki said turning to follow Alex into the room. "If this isn't a 'social visit' just what kind of a visit is it?"

"Listen, Nikki -- I don't want to play cat and mouse with you. I just want you to leave Samantha alone. It's a real simple request. I thought we had been all through this and you promised that you would leave me alone and let me get on with my life and now this . . ."

"Now What?" questioned a very confused looking Nikki. "What the Hell are you rambling on about, and **who** is S-a-m-a-n-t-h-a?"

Alex was trying her damndest to keep from letting her temper get the best of her but little by little it was slipping into a dangerous zone. She walked closer to the slender blonde and gently pushed her back.

"Nikki -- I don't want this to end up in a fight between the two of us but you know perfectly well who Samantha is. She's my new lover. She said you followed her the first night we met and I have a really bad feeling that it was you who vandalized her car when we left for San Francisco . . ."

"Hold on, HOLD ON!" Nikki screamed at Alex as she pushed the tall dark-haired woman back away from her. "I have no idea what you are talking about. And I would suggest that you keep that nasty little temper of yours in check while you're in **my** house."

"Nikki, why can't we just settle this like adults?" Alex wanted to know.

"Because I don't know what you're talking about, Alex. I've never seen this little Samantha of yours. What's she like -- can she give you a go for your money like I could?"

"Nikki -- we were at the Sawdust Festival today. She said you may have tripped her, she wasn't sure of that but it was you who helped her before she hit the ground. She described you to a tee." Alex looked at Nikki and noted the confused look on the tall blonde's face.

"Listen, Alex," Nikki confessed, "I would probably be more than happy to have been the one to have tripped your little friend -- it was probably quite an amusing little incident -- and I hate to disappoint you -- but, It Wasn't Me! Now if that's all you came here for, I suggest you take your sorry ass back to that sniveling brat who tells tales out of school and keep it there." Nikki walked to the front door and opened it, motioning to Alex that the conversation was finished and that she could leave.

Alex had a feeling that if Nikki had been the person she was looking for that she would have gloated about getting away with the vandalism and about scaring the hell out of Samantha. She never was one to deny any of her nasty deeds before. What was puzzling Alex was that if it wasn't Nikki -- who was it? She couldn't think of anyone else who would have any reason to act the way this stranger had been acting.

"Okay, Nikki," Alex finally gave in, "I'll go and you know what? I'll even take your word that it isn't you who's following Samantha. But if I find out that you've lied to me, I will be all over you in a heartbeat -- do you understand that?" She shook her finger in Nikki's face as she passed her on the way out the door.

"Yeah, Alex and I love you, too!" was the only response she got from the slender blonde as she slammed the front door behind Alex.

Nikki turned around and walked back into the living room, picked up the open Dos Equis she had taken out of the refrigerator for Alex and downed it. She then turned and looked at the picture of Alex she still had sitting on the end table in the living room, a devilish smile crossing her face as she picked up the silver frame. "Oh, you do have your troubles now don't you, my hot headed Greek? Your new little vixen may be in for quite a surprise."

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Alex kept mulling the facts over and over in her mind on the way home. Nikki was very convincing that it was not she who was causing the problems, but if not Nikki -- then who? Was there another tall, slender blonde with brown eyes who had a quarrel to pick with her? It hardly seemed possible, but then Nikki was not one to deny her involvement in a situation, no matter what type of situation it was. She was a lot of things -- spoiled, head strong, quick tempered, jealous -- but Alex had never known her to be a liar. No, it must have been someone else Samantha saw. Someone who looked an awful lot like Nikki. She would give her ex-lover the benefit of the doubt this time, but if things became more complicated the next visit to Nikki might not end as amicably.

Exiting the elevator she turned and set the security for the floors below then quietly opened the door to the living area. The lights were low and there was no sounds coming from inside. She was caught between calling out Samantha's name and waking her up or being quiet and frightening her if she was awake. She decided that it was too quiet for Samantha to be awake and opted for the silent approach into the living room. In seconds she saw that she had made the right decision. Samantha was slumped over on the couch a pad of some sort in her hand and a pen that had dropped to the floor when the small blonde could no longer keep her eyes open.

Alex tiptoed over and retrieved the pen from the floor and then gently took the pad from her lover's hands. Samantha just settled herself deeper into the couch with a dreamy smile upon her face. Alex looked down at the pad and saw that Samantha had been writing. There hadn't been much free time in the past couple of days and Alex made a mental note to be sure to give Samantha enough private time for her writing. She looked down at the pad and read what turned out to be a poem written in the almost calligraphic handwriting of her lover:

### *IN THE QUIET*

*In the quiet of the morn, you come to me with schemes*

*Through the quiet of the night, your presence brings sweet dreams*

*But the quiet of the hour, just before you're near*

*Has me caught,*

*So very caught,*

*In the quiet - Dear.*

Alex placed the pad on the tray they were using until the tables arrived along with the pen and then knelt down in front of Samantha. She was looking into the face of a sleeping angel, her angel. She bent forward and gently kissed Samantha on the lips then whispered in the sleeping woman's ear. "I love you more than you will ever know."

A smile graced the face in front of her as arms reached out and engulfed Alex. "I'm glad you're home, I missed you," Samantha murmured as she batted her eyes and opened them slightly.

"How'd your meeting go? Is everything taken care of?" Samantha wanted to know.

"Pretty much, my love. But let's not go into that tonight. We can discuss that in the morning. Right now I want to make good on a promise I made this morning."

Samantha opened her eyes wide, "You made a promise this morning? I don't remember a promise this morning."

"Remember when I told you Festival first -- Samantha later? Well, Samantha -- it's later." Alex smiled as she picked Samantha up off the couch and carried her into the bedroom where she deposited her on the bed. "Of course if you're too tired . . ."

Her answer was two arms that reached out and found their way under her shirt. Soft fingers played her back like a fine instrument as she placed her body on top of the smaller one lying on the bed. Samantha was already in a nightshirt so disposal of that was easy. Alex stood back up momentarily and dispensed of her garments as well then rejoined her lover on the bed.

"Alex, don't you think we ought to talk about . . ."

"No, Samantha -- all I want to do right now is to make love to you. No talk, no discussion, no one else in the world right now but the two of us." Softly, she let her lips barely touch the skin on her lover's face. Alex relished in the fact that she could produce love bumps so quickly on the smooth, pale skin.

The raven-haired seductress continued to shower the smaller woman with kisses over her entire body. Seeing Nikki again tonight had brought back memories. Some had been good but most had been those she had tried to push down into the recesses of her mind, never to be retrieved again. She was thankful that Samantha was nothing like the person she had left an hour ago. Alex was also thankful that being with Samantha had given her a new outlook on life. "You really are

related to the Little People aren't you, my Irish imp? You have the magic that transforms. I know you have transformed me into a better person."

The small blonde attempted to retort but was quieted as silken lips covered hers, turning words into nothing more than sensual utterances.

In Alex's mind Samantha was a gift to be treasured. Samantha would have blushed if she knew just how high a pedestal she had been placed on by the woman lying beside her in bed.

Alex immersed herself in the moment, "I want to make you the happiest woman on earth, Samantha. Tell me what you want." Hands traveled adeptly across the soft white skin, stopping along the way to tantalize certain areas on their way to the soft mound of flaxen hair between the thighs of the smaller woman.

Words were not readily available from the small blonde. As the long slender fingers of her lover strayed down her thighs and played in the warm moist area between, searching now familiar territory, two words only escaped Samantha's lips. "Alex, please!"

"Please what, my love?" came the question as the taller woman positioned her body lower down the bed, her lips lingering where fingers still played, a smile gracing her face. "Tell me what you want, Samantha."

"You, Alex -- I just want you. Do whatever you desire . . . just touch me . . . kiss me . . . love me. Alex -- just love me!"

Continued in Part 14

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Laguna Nights ~ by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to

the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself and to my daughter, Nicole, for constant encouragement. Thanks to you for reading it.

WomynBard@aol.com

## **Part 14**

### **Chapter 14**

On Sunday morning Alex got up early as usual and proceeded to make breakfast for Samantha. This, she told herself, would be the beginning of a tradition. Breakfast was the one meal she was good at cooking and she knew it was one of Samantha's favorite meals as well. She remembered growing up with Sunday breakfast being a very family oriented time and she wanted to start this relationship out on a positive track.

Her mind also wandered around how she was going to explain to Samantha everything that had happened at Nikki's the night before. She had the feeling that Samantha was a little jealous of Nikki and wanted to put that train of thought out of Samantha's head forever. There was no way she would ever leave Sam for Nikki and the petite blonde needed to know that beyond a shadow of a doubt. But, she also had to be informed that Nikki was probably not the stranger who had been showing up in odd places since the inception of their relationship. She wasn't sure how she was going to explain exactly Who the stranger was, because at this point she had no idea herself. She needed to tell her lover that Nikki's response to the accusations was very believably innocent and try to get Samantha to understand that for all that Nikki was, she was not a liar.

Alex was still in the kitchen finishing up the pancakes when she hear a sound coming from directly behind her. She turned and bumped into a still sleepy-eyed blonde with a huge smile on her face. "See, I can get myself out of bed in the morning," Samantha purred as she placed her arms around the waist of the taller woman.

"Yeah, so you say," Alex grinned as she ruffled Samantha's hair even more than it already was. "It had to be the smell of the strips and pancakes that got to you up. That's not the same as just waking up on your own."

"Well, it's as much on my own as I get." She snuggled closer to the tall beauty in her arms.

"You felt great last night, Alex and I slept like a baby," Samantha sheepishly remarked as she reached around her lover to grasp a breakfast strip.

"Keep your fingers out of the food until we sit down," Alex chided Sam. "You always sleep like a baby, I can take no credit for that, but the making you feel great -- that I can take credit for and it was all my pleasure -- anytime you want a repeat. . ."

"I think we ought to eat this sensational breakfast first, don't you?" came the hungry reply from the small blonde. "What can I do to help?"

"You can get a cup of tea and go sit yourself down at the table. Everything is just about ready."

Breakfast went pretty much as Alex had planned and she explained as best she could about the situation with the "stranger" and the fact that it was probably not Nikki. Samantha listened intently, interrupting very little and when Alex was finished she simply stated that she had absolute trust in Alex and if she thought that the "stranger" had not been Nikki then they had better keep a watch out for who it just might be. Then Samantha came up with a question that had somehow bypassed Alex's thought processes completely. "Alex, do you have a picture of Nikki?" She half-hoped that the answer would be no but knew that it probably would be yes. "I could tell you immediately if the person I'm talking about is Nikki or not."

"I don't know why I didn't think of that before. Probably your being in danger short circuited all my natural thought processes," Alex commented getting up from the table and going out the door. "I'll be right back."

Across the hall in the junk room was a box that she hadn't opened in over a year, yet didn't have the fortitude to destroy. It was all that was left of her relationship with Nikki. This singular box was all that was left of the good memories of their time together. She shuffled through the cards and trinkets and found the large envelope that contained all the pictures she hadn't had the heart to get rid of. She quickly opened the envelope and searched for a picture of Nikki by herself. She certainly didn't want to take one of the two of them back to show Samantha. She already knew that Samantha had a touch of jealousy when it came to Nikki and she didn't need to be feeding into that. Alex found a picture of Nikki that had been taken just before they had broken up. She took it out and placed it on the floor beside her, doing her best to keep her mind on the problems at hand. After putting the envelope back where she had found it, she closed the box and pushed it into the far corner of the room.

An apprehensive Alex walked back into the apartment, photo in hand, "Here, Samantha -- this is what Nikki looks like." Standing behind her lover she placed the picture in her hand.

Samantha didn't have to study the picture for long before stating, "This isn't the person I saw. She looks a lot like this, but she isn't the person in this picture." Samantha looked up at Alex, not a trace of a smile on her face. "If this is Nikki, then Nikki is not the person stalking me. She is telling you the truth, Alex." She handed the picture back to Alex and got up from the table.

"Where are you going?" Alex asked.

"To the bathroom, do I need permission?" came the reply without a hint of humor.



Alex stood dumbfounded watching as Sam walked out of the room, "Of course you don't need permission, but Samantha . . ."

"What?"

"Nothing." Alex stood there not knowing if she had done something wrong but having a gut feeling that showing Samantha the picture had not been a wise choice.

While she waited for Sam to come back into the room she started cleaning up the mess she had made making breakfast. She cleared off the table and put all the perishables away, having only the griddle and frying pan left when she decided Samantha was taking way too long and she needed to go check on her.

The bathroom door was closed so she knocked, feeling really odd about doing something she hadn't had to do since they had been together. "Samantha, you okay?"

"Yeah -- fine," came the soft answer from inside the room.

Silence followed but Alex couldn't let it go. "Honey, can I come in?"

Another soft reply, "I'd rather you didn't."

"Samantha, what's bothering you? We need to talk about this." Alex almost pleaded.

"I don't know what's wrong," came the muffled answer.

Alex decided not to wait for an invitation into the room. She tried the handle and found that Samantha had not locked the door. Entering the bathroom she discovered Samantha sitting in the middle of an empty Jacuzzi, knees up around her face, arms around her knees. She looked up at Alex with a tear streaked face. "She's really pretty. I didn't know she was so pretty." She put her face back down on her knees and sobbed.

"Samantha, don't," was all Alex could think of to say. She stepped into the Jacuzzi and squatted down in front of her lover. "If I had known you were going to react like this I would have never shown you that photo." She tried to take Samantha in her arms, but the smaller woman pulled back.

"How could you go from someone beautiful like her to someone like me? I don't have anything going for me, I have a tendency to gain weight and I'm short." Tears continued to fall from her eyes as she looked up at Alex.

The expression on Alex's face turned from compassion to anger and her tone of voice followed suit. She grabbed the smaller woman by the arms, her grip leaving white marks in the skin around her fingers, "Samantha Riley, I do not want to ever have this conversation again so you had best listen good to what I have to say." Samantha looked up into ice blue eyes. Alex had never looked at her like this before and it was scary. Her arm hurt where Alex was gripping it but

she didn't move, she simply listened. "I love you, Samantha. I do not love Nikki. Nikki and I are history, just like you and anyone you may have had affections for in the past. You are my family, my life. You can't do this to yourself, and you can't do this to me. Do you understand, Samantha? If we need to talk then so be it but don't shut me out and don't ever think that Nikki will come between us."

Alex released her hold on the small blonde and waited for a reaction.

Samantha eyes filled again with tears, short hiccupping sounds came out between her words as she tried to explain to Alex that she had never felt toward anyone in her entire life the way she felt about her. She pointed out that she had never been jealous of anyone before and didn't know how to deal with the emotion. "Happiness can be shattered so easily. I'm afraid that I'm not good enough for you. I'm afraid of losing you."

Alex sat down next to the sobbing woman and cradled her in her arms. "Samantha, I don't know what to do to make you more secure. What if I made you an equal partner in the Clinic? Would that prove to you that I was serious . . . that there was no one else in my life?"

Finally the tears subsided and a smile broke through like a ray of sunshine in the small room. "Oh, Alex. Don't be ridiculous. Just the offer . . . I'm being silly . . . mood swings maybe." She threw her arms around the taller woman's neck and kissed her passionately. "Alex -- never change -- I'm so sorry."

They continued to sit in the Jacuzzi talking. Alex tried to get Samantha to the point where talking about Nikki was not such a big deal. She went into detail about the differences in the relationship she had with Nikki and the one the two of them shared, putting Samantha more and more at ease. Near the end of the conversation Alex gently scolded Samantha for her statement about her not having anything going for her in her life. She confessed to reading the poem Samantha had written the night before and told her that she thought it was lovely which had Samantha blushing and mumbling under her breath about it just being something she scribbled while sitting and waiting for Alex to come home. Alex mentioned the fact that she wanted to make sure that Sam got ample time to pursue her writing and that she would try to give her some private time in which to do it. Samantha gave Alex a hug and told her that time for writing would come when the writing came and that spending time with her was more important than writing the great American novel at this point in her life.

The rest of the day the two women spent just being together, talking, walking along the beach, and even swimming. It turned out to be your basic, run of the mill, do nothing much Sunday and they were both overjoyed that the day held no surprises, because the week ahead of them would keep them more than busy.

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Monday came and went before the gals realized it was there and over.

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Tuesday was a flurry of new people for Samantha to meet, tours around the Clinic and preparations for the catered affair on Friday. There was a phone call from Sonny who carried on about how excited he was that they would be arriving Friday morning and how he would get to see all his favorite people.

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Hump day hit the girls before they knew it and Samantha began to get butterflies about the guests who would be arriving the following day. Guests in her eyes, family in Alex's. She was constantly checking and rechecking all the incidentals in the parental suite to make sure that everything was perfect. Alex found her up there after everyone had left straightening the curtains and adjusting the dishes in the cabinets.

"Samantha, everything looks perfect. You can stop fussing. My parents are not going to tear this place apart; they're just happy they don't have to stay in a motel." She took the smaller woman in her arms and cuddled her. "Come on, let's go to our place; this place will take care of itself until it has residents."

"I just want everything to be impeccable when your parents get here. I don't want them to think I'm some sort of inept slob."

"Where did that come from?" Alex wanted to know. "Inept slob? Samantha you are the furthest person from those two words that I know. Cut it out and just be yourself." She pushed the smaller woman out of the suite and headed her in the direction of their rooms.

"So, what time did you say they'd be arriving?" Samantha asked with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Mom said they were going to leave the house around 10 o'clock so they should be here before noon. They are looking forward to meeting you Samantha and going to the Pageant of the Masters with us. Guess we're going to have to take that show in twice this year. I don't mind seeing it once but once you've seen it . . . "

"Alex, you don't have to go again when my folks come if you don't really want to." Samantha offered.

"No . . . I just like to complain about getting too much culture all in the same month. Mom and Kelley got tickets for all of us, including Sonny and Ray so maybe it would be nice if we purchased the tickets for your family?" She opened the door to the apartment and ushered Samantha in.

Sam turned around and faced her lover, "Let me give my Mom a call tonight and see if they've purchased the tickets already. If they haven't that would be a real nice gesture."

"If your Dad balks at the idea of a woman buying his family the tickets, tell him that I can use it as a business expense. Most businessmen love to use up expense allowances." She smiled and kissed Samantha on the cheek. "Glass of wine?"

"Please." Walking into the living room she seated herself on the couch and admired the new tables that flanked either end and the large table in the middle. "I'm really glad these tables arrived before your Mom got here -- they really are beautiful, Alex." She patted the couch next to her indicating that she wanted Alex to join her. "So -- tell me what to expect when meeting your parents."

"Don't you want to go eat first?" Alex asked as she handed Samantha her wine.

"No, dinner after," Samantha smiled. "I want to be at least a little prepared. How about some pictures, you know ones of you growing up -- I could make some popcorn to tied us over until dinner and we could . . ."

"Samantha, they'll be here tomorrow," Alex interjected.

"That's precisely the point. I'm not at all prepared to meet them, especially Kelley. I mean, I know what your Mom looks like and I even know a little about her but not your other Mom. Come on Alex, give me a break." Soft green doe-like eyes met intense blue orbs, the former melting the latter.

"Oh, okay," Alex gave in, "but can we please go eat first? Then I'll sit here with you the rest of the evening and reminisce. You'll feel like you're seeing two old friends instead of meeting your new in-laws." She laughed, got up from the couch and pulled Samantha with her. "Ah . . . but this is going to cost you tonight . . ." she smiled broadly and kissed her lover passionately.

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After a leisurely dinner at the closest restaurant with a full-sized salad bar, the gals made their way back to the apartment. True to her word Alex went across the hall and brought back a box full of memorabilia. She had albums her Mother had given her from the day she was born up to and including the past few years.

Samantha oo'd over the baby pictures and giggled over the photos of an adolescent Alex. She saw the transition of Alex from a child to a young adult and finally to the beautiful woman she loved. It was quite obvious that Aurora tended to lean toward the hippie generation in the way Alex was dressed as a youngster, macrame necklaces and patches on her jeans. There was even a picture of a three-year-old Alex sitting on a motorcycle with her own helmet. One of Samantha's favorite photos was that of Alex on her first day of school in the second grade. There she stood, not in a dress but in green jeans with a matching denim jacket and a green tee-shirt that announced to all the world the word "Ms." She was definitely a woman's libber from the get-go! Photographs were rarely taken of Alex in a dress and Samantha concluded that the young Alex was probably just as headstrong as the one she fell in love with and would only wear what she wanted.

There were photographs of Alex on the volleyball team, Alex on the softball team, Alex on the basketball team and of course Alex in her martial arts uniforms. "No dancing?" Samantha innocently asked.

"No -- I was a klutz when it came to dancing and it didn't really go along with all the sports. Mom was the one who insisted on the martial arts training, she thought at least that way I would get some form and poise, and I guess it worked." Her smile turned a little downward as she continued, "What Mom hadn't been ready for was the aggression that came with it. I didn't seem to want learn the lesson that the sport was for self-protection and peace and not for showing how easy it was for you to get the best of someone else. There was a time when I was actually a bit of a bully. But with a Mother like mine you learn to focus on positive things and she tried her best to keep me from picking on kids just so I could win."

Holding up a handful of multi-colored belts, Samantha had a look of awe on her face. "Are these all belts you qualified for? There are so many of them."

"That's only some of them. I started out in Tae Kwon Do . . . Here, let me take a look at those." Sorting through the belts she explained, "Mom still has my white belt which was my very first, and I think she still has my first Do Bok, which is what the uniform is called in Tae Kwon Do. It's hard to remember which order they were received in but it seems the second belt I got was this orange one, a little further down was the green, then a striped one, then the blue. There were a couple of these others before the brown and finally the black. It was a lifetime ago, Samantha."

"You're not that old, Alex," the small blonde smiled up from where she was rummaging through the box.

"No, but Mom started me out at five. When I got into junior high I started taking some Kung Fu lessons and then in high school I began the Tai Chi."

With a far-away look in her dark blue eyes she stared out toward the ocean. "I re-channeled and put most of my competitive feelings into the business once I was out of college. I was not very well liked in school and still am not by a lot of professional people, Samantha. You don't know the Alex Dorian that the business world knows."

"Did you use any weapons in your martial arts studies?" Samantha wanted to know.

"I got fairly proficient at wielding a few different weapons." Alex admitted. She reached into the box and brought out what looked like two 2-section sticks hooked together at the top. "These are called Ee Chul Bong. I got pretty good at using these but they can be really dangerous."

She put them back in the box and then changed the subject by opening another album and showing her favorite pictures of her parents. Samantha let the discussion of martial arts drop, as it wasn't difficult to realize Alex didn't want to talk about it any more. They turned back to looking at the photographs in chronological order and viewed Aurora and Kelley as they went from being young people, actually younger than she and Alex were right now, to mature adults. She saw Kelley's hair go from an ebony color almost matching Alex's to a distinguished looking salt and pepper. Alex filled her in on the things they liked and disliked, the kind of people they were and what it was like to be raised by them.

It was extremely interesting to hear the full account of the raising of a child in a lesbian home, that was both socially and politically active. As a young child and adolescent she had gone to Gay Pride Parades all up and down the coast of California. Samantha soon realized that Alex was graced with many "uncles" who would otherwise have been called "aunts." She had been loved by the entire extended family which included literally hundreds of people. Alex informed Samantha that probably more than a few of them would arrive on their doorstep sometime during the Friday Open House. She started to tell about the different belief systems that had filtered through her childhood but changed her mind and told Samantha to question Aurora about things like that -- it would give them something to talk about and Aurora loved talking on esoteric topics.

While flipping through the pages of the more recent albums Alex started to remove some pictures and was quickly stopped by Samantha.

"I can't let you do that, Alex. Those women were part of your past. I'm your future and I have to get used to the fact that there were others you cared deeply about before me." Her eyes narrowed into deep green slits and she put on her best intimidating voice, "But . . . take my word for it Alexis Dorian . . . you had better not let those sapphires of yours wander now that I am here. You Got That?"

Alex feigned her best *you really scare me look* and assured Samantha there would be no eye wandering. Closing the last of the albums she put it back in the box and turned to her lover. "So, are you quite acquainted with your in-laws now?"

"I think I have a much better handle on who they are and even a little more insight on who you are." Samantha replied.

Raising an eyebrow and smiling a crooked smile Alex countered the statement. "Oh, you think you know me a little better, now do you? When do I get to see your life in pictures? Turn about is fair play you know?" Alex questioned.

"I guess we could do a "Samantha" version of tonight after your folks leave. But my Mom was not as doting as yours; I don't have tons of pictures and albums, just a few." She snuggled close to Alex and hugged her gently. "Ready for bed?"

"Thought you'd never ask. Bubbles or shower?"

A seductive glance and a whispered, "Nice leisurely bubbles" was just the answer she had been hoping for.

The tall, dark-haired beauty undressed in the bedroom then proceeded to pick up the two fluted champagne glasses she had filled moments ago. Samantha had candles burning in the bathroom and the soft radiating light from them gave rise to an almost ethereal atmosphere. When Alex stepped into the room her first glimpse of Samantha was akin to looking into the face of an angel. "You are beautiful," she whispered to the vision before her. The absence of light hid the blush on Samantha's cheeks as Alex stepped carefully into the Jacuzzi and handed one of the

champagne glasses to her lover. "We covered a lot of territory tonight, my love, and we've been through quite an emotional merry-go-round the past few days. Here's to us, Samantha -- to you and me and to our future."

The lovers intertwined their arms, each drinking from the other's glass. Alex took the glass from Samantha and placed them both on the edge of the tub then pulled her lover close. The double ritual of bathing afforded the lovers the opportunity to touch and stroke at leisure every crevice and curve of the body next to them.

Samantha opted not to use the puff tonight and poured the body gel directly into her hands making them the vehicles of a soapy seduction. Starting at Alex's neck she worked her way slowly down the tall muscular body, caressing every inch as she trailed her fingers over nipples standing hard and erect and continuing on to the small indentation of her lover's navel. She could feel Alex's heart beat increase in speed as her hands reached erogenous zones and methodically inched their way along the smooth soft skin of her lover's stomach. The small blonde pulled herself closer to the object of her heart's desire as she reached the soft dark curls of her lover's mound. Straddling Alex she placed both her hands between the taller woman's legs and squeezed ever so gently. Alex closed her eyes and let out an involuntary moan as Samantha entered her slowly and rhythmically. "Let's not finish here, my love," Samantha whispered.

"You want me to stand up and walk?" came the panicked response.

A smile crossed the face of the green-eyed imp as she answered, "Well . . . I guess I could try to carry you."

"Not in this lifetime," Alex retorted as she slowly stood up in the tub and pulled her lover up with her. She reached for two towels and wrapped Samantha in the first before throwing the second around her own naked body.

As the lovers entered the bedroom the melodious music of Kenny G sounded softly from the player and *The Heroine of Niguel* was flickering with her first candle, having been lit by Samantha earlier in the evening. The iridescent light coming from the sapphire eyes of the candleholder cast a blue hue on the entire bedroom, accentuating the stars that shone through the floor to ceiling windows.

The fragrant vanilla scent from the candle permeated the room and the already prepared bed beckoned the lovers. Putting herself in a supine position on the bed Alex invitingly held out her arms, "Come here you little minx . . . and the tables shall turn on she who teases."

"Teases -- who was teasing?" Samantha protested. "I just wanted to taste you and not have the aftertaste of soap in my mouth, besides that I can't hold my breath very long. I'm not half fish like someone else I know."

Long arms reached further out and grabbed two small hands, pulling the accompanying body down onto the bed. "There now, isn't this better than standing above me arguing?" Deep set blue eyes twinkled in the flickering candle glow of the room. Nestling closer to the small frame she

had pulled on top of her, Alex inhaled the perfume that was uniquely Samantha. "You always smell so sweet. No wonder I can't keep my lips off you," she murmured into the flaxen hair as her arms tightened their hold on the small frame.

"Alex, don't you remember . . . it was me who was . . . Alex . . ."

A quick rolling maneuver and the small blonde found herself lying under her hero, her whisper lost in the moment. "Mom will be here tomorrow," Alex explained, "and she never sleeps which means we will get no sleep for at least three days. Sonny will be here on Friday and he's almost as bad as Mom. Consequently, I will devour you tonight for it may be the last chance I get for the next couple of days."

Raven-colored hair tickled small firm breasts as Alex drew circles with her tongue in Samantha's stomach. "You taste as sweet as you smell," she took the time to confess as she sucked on the lower part of Samantha's abdomen, her slender fingers continuing to roll small, hard nipples between them. Suddenly there was a hand on either side of Samantha's face as Alex brought her body up full to passionately kiss the lips of her soul mate while pressing all that she was against the mound of her lover. Samantha separated her legs to allow Alex full access to her body, no longer trying to protest being on the receiving end of the love making. Alex placed one muscular arm down the entire length of the smaller woman's frame, then shifted to straddle her lover's thigh with her body to allow room for the hand to explore freely the soft skin beneath the golden curls. Fingers found the small zone of pleasure but lingered only moments before Alex again shifted her weight to lower her mouth to the same area and part take in the feast that was her lover. Slowly flicking her tongue in the area where her fingers had just been, she immediately found the small hard bud standing as erect as the nipples her fingers had moments before left behind. The invitation was unmistakable. Ever the experienced lover, Alex courted the zone slowly at first, smiling as a warm liquid saturated the entire area. Her heart beat faster as Samantha's gyrations urged her on. She allowed her tongue full access to the realm of pleasure, granting it entrance where fingers would surely follow.

Samantha gripped the pillow beneath her head as her moans of pleasure filled the room. "Alex . . . you don't know what you're doing to me," she almost screamed.

"Of course I do," came the sly reply as Alex expertly continued. "Samantha, I am going to make you mine."

A whispered "Too late," was heard, followed by, "Been There, Done That."

Long gentle fingers found their way to the soft hollow area within the recesses of the small blonde. "No one could ever love you the way I do, Samantha," Alex purred as she brought herself up to lie half-on the body of the woman she adored. "Pleasuring you is as erotic for me as it is for you."

A groan of ecstasy escaped Samantha's lips.

"I want you Samantha, I need you."



Samantha reached down and placed her hand on soft wet curls and the silky territory beneath.

"Just push Samantha, hold you hand still and push and . . . by the Goddess . . ."

"Alex . . . by the Gods Alex . . ."

Tomorrow was going to be a busy day, but tonight Samantha would sleep soundly, pleasantly exhausted from the interactions with her lover. Only dreams of Alex would be allowed to filter through the darkness of satisfaction that enveloped the small blonde as she fell into a deep sleep, a smile of contentment playing on her lips. The arms of Morpheus would also engulf Alex tonight as dreams of her angel already filled her mind. An unusual tranquillity saturated her entire being and she slept knowing that she had satisfied her lover as no one else ever had and if she had anything to do with the decision, no one else ever would.

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A funny thing happened on Thursday morning. Samantha was the first to open her eyes and leave the bed. *It's gotta be nerves*, she admitted to herself, *nothing else would get me up at the crack of dawn*. She walked into the bathroom and stared at the face looking back at her. *Affirmation time! You are one lucky girl, Samantha Renee Riley. Alex loves you. You are worthy. Aurora and Kelley will like you! Now -- get a grip and go make some tea*. She splashed some water on her face, combed her hair and brushed her teeth to finish the ritual.

Walking back through the bedroom, she stole a glance at the bed to take in a sight she had never seen before, Alex lying sleeping peacefully as the first beams of morning sunlight entered the room. Her beautiful hero -- she looked so serene -- Samantha wanted to go over and kiss her, but feared her dark angel would open her azure deeps and the spell would be broken. With a twinkle in her emerald eyes, she settled for blowing a kiss aimed directly at her lover's cheek as she quietly left the room.

Alex stirred slightly and placed a slender hand to her face and smiled as though something magical had just occurred in her dream.

Samantha was sitting curled up close to the window, surrounded by pillows, looking out over the ocean, tea in hand, when she felt a light weight on her shoulders and the tender touch of a morning kiss on the top of her head.

"This is certainly a first. What got you out of bed so early?"

Looking up and tilting her head back she smiled at the woman towering over her, "Anticipation I think."

Alex sat beside her and gave her a morning hug to match the kiss she had just received. "We've nothing to do before the folks arrive. Want to go for a swim and then out to breakfast?"

"Sounds like just what I need to keep my mind off waiting for them to arrive," Samantha beamed.

It was a leisurely swim on the deserted beach and the two women appreciated the tranquility. Breakfast, on the other hand, was a new experience. Samantha sat and stared at the familiar menu. "Nothing seems appetizing. I don't think I'm really very hungry."

"Hello? Earth to Samantha!" Alex looked on incredulously. "Are you not feeling well?" She put a hand up to Samantha's forehead in a mock gesture of taking a temperature. "Samantha -- this is breakfast we're talking about."

"I know -- I'm just not very hungry."

"Listen, Honey, I don't know when we'll be eating again. Why don't we just order an omelet special and a side of pancakes and share?" Concerned blue eyes stared at the blonde across the table. "You have to eat something, Samantha."

"Okay, sharing sounds good. I'll probably get my appetite back when the food arrives." She smiled over at Alex and winked, "Guess you know how to put me on a diet -- get me nervous."

When they arrived back at the house at 11:30, a metallic silver Mercedes-Benz Cabriolet was sitting in front of the warehouse, soft top down, occupant free. Samantha just looked at Alex and received an affirmative nod.

"Guess they went for a walk on the beach or maybe just a look around the outside of the building. Come on, Sweetie, let's go meet your in-laws." Alex grabbed Samantha's hand and helped her out of the car. She pulled her close and kissed her gently. "Mom and Kelley will love you almost as much as I do, I can guarantee it."

"I'm glad you're so damn sure of yourself, Ms. Dorian -- I just hope you're right." Samantha hugged her closely and kissed her back. Smiling up at the dark-haired beauty she winked, "Okay -- let's go meet the lions."

Aurora and Kelley were taking in the scenery around the building and the view of the beach from the cliff when they heard Alex's car pull up. It wasn't the first time they had been here, but it was the first time they had seen the building completely finished and landscaped. Kelley approved of what her daughter had done with the old building and the land surrounding it. It was going to be a very lucrative investment for all concerned; she was sure of it.

Two young women walking southward and two older women walking northward met in the middle of the cliff overlooking the beach. Samantha was surprised to see that Alex actually looked like a combination of the two of them. Kelley was tall and had angular features while Aurora was only a slip of a woman, not any taller and maybe even a little shorter than Samantha herself. On closer observation there was no doubt where the piercing sapphire eyes had come from, ones almost identical to Alex's were looking through Samantha and into her soul.

Aurora broke eye contact with Samantha to smile broadly at her offspring. She held out her arms and walked closer to the two younger women. Alex hugged her Mother closely and gave her a kiss, then stepped over and did the same to Kelley. She motioned for Samantha to join her and holding her lover's small hand in her own she began the introductions.

"Samantha, as if you didn't already know, these are my parents Kelley and Aurora. Mom, Kelley . . .this is Samantha."

Kelley nodded and affirmed that it was nice to meet Samantha. Aurora started to do the same but changed her mind and walked over and hugged the obviously nervous young woman. Aurora's blue eyes twinkled and her smile was reminiscent of one Samantha had already grown to love, "I've heard a lot about you Samantha. It's nice to finally get to meet you in person."

Unable to control the tremor in her voice Samantha did her best to acknowledge the greeting. "I've heard a lot about the two of you, also. It really is good to get to meet you, but I have to admit I was . . . am still a little nervous."

"Well, that's just plain silly. No need to be nervous -- I hear you're not just a new acquaintance -- we're Family." Samantha was put a bit more at ease at the sight of the broad smile on Aurora's face, as well as the weight of a familiar strong arm that came back to rest on her shoulders.

"So, where were you two coming from?" Aurora asked.

"We just stopped for some breakfast." Alex answered.

Looking at her watch and then at her daughter, an eyebrow went up and a crooked smile came upon the older woman's face, "Almost a brunch wasn't it? We ate on the way up also, so we should all be hungry again at about the same time. Shall we go see this completed project of yours, Alex."

More than happy to have the attention diverted from the meeting of Samantha and her parents, Alex maneuvered the small blonde on her arm around and starting walking toward the front of the building. The next hour or so was spent going over the entire Clinic and explaining how everything was going to work. Kelley felt the spaciousness and layout of the rooms to be very well throughout. She was especially impressed with the track overlooking the pool area and with the equipment in the gym.

Aurora was delighted with the esoteric designs in the massage rooms and on the walls lining many areas of the Clinic. She loved Alex's office and the view it afforded her, and she couldn't say enough about the large desk that had been placed in the room just days before. The pool was her favorite place and she kept raving about the paintings of the sea animals. She even turned to Kelley and suggested that they have the same artist paint some of the animals in their pool. Kelley criticized the idea of having to empty the entire pool just to have it painted and cited secondarily that she was not sure she would like to swim with mammals other than humans on a daily basis.

Finally it was time to take the small group upstairs and show off the new parental suite as well as the main apartment. They had been down once or twice over the past four months, during the construction, but hadn't been down since the major inside construction of tearing down walls and adding partitions had been finished. It had still looked pretty much like a warehouse the last time Kelley and Aurora had seen the inside of the building. Kelley was especially anxious to see how Alex had handled the completion of the project.

"Samantha's totally responsible for the atmosphere of your suite, and I think you're really going to be pleased with it," Alex gave credit where credit was due.

That was definitely not the statement Samantha had wanted to hear come out of Alex's mouth. "Oh, great," she softly vocalized, hoping only Alex would hear. "Now if they don't like the suite, they'll know who to blame."

"What would there be not to like?" Aurora chimed in overhearing the statement. "It's a place to stay while we're up here visiting the two of you, and we don't have to go to a motel. Besides, if Alex says you have good taste, Samantha, I would trust that you must." The older woman smiled again at the younger to put her at ease and received a returned smile and a blush that seemed to accentuate the green of Samantha's eyes.

Aurora had no intentions of disappointing her daughter, it seemed so far that Samantha was everything Alex had stated over the phone, and Aurora wanted this day of introduction to be a pleasant experience for all involved. She smiled graciously and commented positively on all the little hints of personal touches that were definitely Samantha. She put her arm around the small blonde's waist, as they walked from room to room. "Looks like I finally have someone new in the family who's more my height," she commented as they walked through the last of the rooms, "and one whose taste in furnishings and decorating is very similar to my own. You did a fine job, Samantha. It was quite a large accomplishment, I might add."

"Why don't Alex and I go down and get the luggage while you and Samantha go on into the apartment," Kelley suggested as the small troupe walked in the direction of the elevator.

"Will you call for dinner reservations when you get back up?" Aurora wanted to know.

Kelley raised an eyebrow, mumbled something to Alex then turned around and answered her lover, "Of course I will, Aurora. Don't I always? There's plenty of time."

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The rest of the afternoon and evening went smoother than Samantha could have ever imagined. Alex had been right again; she and Aurora seemed to hit it off immediately after her initial shyness and self-consciousness wore off. Kelley was a little more standoffish and seemed to relate more to Alex and the business. Similar to Alex she didn't seem to be much of a talker, but then Aurora did enough to make up for any lack of conversation from the tall quiet woman. When she thought about it that was another trait Samantha seemed to have in common with the Mother of her lover . . . they both loved to talk.

Dinner was an exquisite experience. Kelley found a restaurant in the Laguna Hills that even Alex had not been to. It was small, yet elegant. A quiet establishment, almost hidden in the hills, but with a view of the lights of Laguna and the surrounding area. They ate on an outside patio with candles on the tables and subtle music permeating the air. It was truly a relaxing meal to help welcome Samantha into the family.

Both Aurora and Kelley could see the change that had occurred in their daughter. She was more at ease than they had seen her in years and she had no trouble smiling and laughing. Conversation, which normally was a chore with Alex, seemed to come easily with Samantha at her side. Alex had always been a headstrong, take control-type of person but her parents could see that this small snip of a young woman had captured their daughter's heart and melted some of the ice that had surrounded it for years. Aurora felt that perhaps she could stop worrying about Alex now, maybe her impetuous daughter who always seemed to pick lovers who were destructive, had finally met the soul who would be able to bring her some peace of mind and allow her to settle down and be happy.

There was quite a day in store for the entire troupe tomorrow. Ray and Sonny would be arriving early and the open house was to start around noon with the caterers arriving around nine to get things set up. They decided on a quick nightcap in the apartment and then an early end to the evening.

To Samantha's surprise and elation, Aurora gave the living room furnishings her seal of approval. She really seemed to love the unique tables they had found at the Festival. Touring the rest of the apartment, her quick indigo eyes also spotted the female candleholder in the bedroom and questioned Alex about it.

"Oh, that's something Samantha bought at the Festival while I was laboriously looking for the tables," came the snide answer as she cocked her head in the direction of her lover and smiled.

"I was drawn into the booth by the unusual display of tree people and this one just jumped out at me. She's called the *Heroine of Niguel* and her sapphire eyes reminded me of Alex. I couldn't resist." Samantha blushed slightly at the retelling of why she had to have the object.

"Was it the eyes, the female or the heroine that really got your attention," Aurora asked with a twinkle in her eyes as she watched the younger woman blush even deeper. "Ahhhh," she smiled. "Did you know that Laguna Niguel is only about four miles from here?"

"I didn't even know there was a Laguna Niguel," came the innocent answer.

"Niguel was the name of a Juaneno Indian village that was once located on the Aliso Creek. When California was still a Mexican territory Rancho Niguel was one of the largest sheep rancheros in the area. The ranch and its land changed hands many times and in the late 1950's the area became known as Laguna Niguel. So now you have a little piece of history to go along with your "heroine", Samantha."

"Remind me never to play a trivia game with you, Aurora. I can now see where Alex gets her ability to remember all the small details that other people would just overlook. You would have been proud of the tour guide ability she displayed up in San Francisco." Samantha looked over at her partner with as much pride as she assumed Aurora would have had for the tall beauty.

When they were just about finished walking around the apartment, Kelley walked in from the kitchen carrying an open bottle of Asti Spumonte and four wine glasses. She gave each of the ladies a glass and proceeded to pour. "To double beginnings -- the beginning of a profitable Alternative Paradise and the beginning of a most loving and lasting relationship between our daughter and this lovely young woman before us. So . . ." as glasses clinked ". . . to the Center and to the Girls."

"The Center," Alex mulled over the word -- "Yeah, I like that definition a lot better than clinic for Alternative Paradise. Thanks Kelley." After touching glasses with her parents she turned to Samantha, "To the Center and to Us."

A "Here, Here" from the smaller two women consummated the toast and all drank.

The wine was delicious, but the conversation began to run a little long and was interrupted by Kelley who reminded Aurora that the day ahead was going to be full and that she had promised an early retreat to the suite. Even the evil eye from the articulate author could not deter her mate from practically dragging her off at a decent hour to the guest suite on the other side of the building.

Goodnights were given and both Kelley and Aurora gave Samantha a hug and kiss and again welcomed her into the family. As they were going out the door, Kelley turned and walked back over to the small blonde, leaned close to her ear and whispered that she truly believed her daughter had finally found the woman of her dreams. She smiled as she pulled away and noticed the red tint to Samantha's ear. "You do that quite easily, don't you?" she beamed at Samantha.

"I guess I do," was the only answer Sam could think of as she put a hand up to her ear.

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"Well, you fared pretty well today. Mom didn't have three heads and Kelley didn't breathe fire." Alex teased her mate as they started to undress and get ready for bed.

"Aren't you the funny one? And just how will you react when it's your turn to meet my parents?" came the sarcastic reply.

"Actually, I think I have more to be in fear of than you did. Your parents will not know our real relationship and so I'll have to walk around on pins and needles and try my damndest to keep my hands off you the entire time they are here." Alex responded, giving Samantha a poor-me look.

Samantha walked over to Alex, putting her arms around her lover's waist. "Okay, I guess you have a valid argument there. I'm sorry, but I don't know how else to handle the situation."

"There is no other way," Alex replied "Don't worry about it. All will turn out the way it's supposed to. Your parents will know when it's time for them to know and it will be handled then and not before."

Changing the subject Samantha commented on the statement Alex had made the night before about Aurora not needing much sleep and keeping them all up until the wee hours of the morning. Alex explained that Kelley was tired from the drive up and that she had coerced Aurora into an early night because she knows what Aurora is like when she gets with Sonny and when there is an event going on. Alex assured her mate that the rest of the weekend would definitely show the party-side of her Mother. There would be the open house tomorrow, the Pageant of the Masters on Saturday night and the Festival on Sunday. The rest of the weekend would be anything but quiet and relaxing and they would definitely not be getting a large amount of shut eye.

"But tonight . . ." Alex poured them each another glass of wine and turned out the living room lights. The moon and stars illuminated the living room enough for the two lovers to see each other and cast a romantic aura on the entire room. Alex raised her glass and toasted for the second time this evening. "To the Center and To Us. I love you so, Samantha. Today has been a very important day. I told you my parents would love you almost as much as I do."

"I love you, too, Alex. I don't know about your parents "loving" me, but at least they do seem to have graciously accepted me."

"Your choice, Samantha -- swim in the ocean, walk on the beach or bath in the Jacuzzi?"

"None of the above," came the quick reply, "what would you say to a swim with the dolphins, otters and manatee under the moon and the stars?"

Even in the dimmed light Samantha could see the sparkle in her lover's eyes. "You don't have to ask twice, sounds great! We doing this in suits or au natural?"

"Oh, I think, perhaps the latter tonight -- I feel adventurous."

Alex looked over at her lover and held back a laugh as she smiled and asked, "Just adventurous or is it the thrill of knowing parents are in the same house and we would be doing something we wouldn't want them to catch us doing? Are you mentally back in high school, Samantha -- going for the thrill?"

"Actually, I never had the opportunity to go for the thrill in high school and wouldn't have had the desire if I did have the opportunity. But . . . I guess it is kind of a thrill knowing your parents will be just two floors above us." The small blonde smiled broadly at her lover and squeezed her hand.

"And just maybe they might be unable to sleep and have the same idea and . . ."

"No! I wasn't thinking anything like that," came the adamant reply from the small blonde, Irish eyes widening at the thought.

"Sure you weren't!" Alex smiled. "Come on let's get going, the night is quickly slipping into morning."

They quickly undressed and donned terrycloth robes before making their way to the elevator. Alex turned the security system off and down they went. The glow from the celestial bodies set a scene that could not have been matched in the most romantic cinemagraphic set imaginable. The water shimmered and the sea animals almost took on life when ripples were formed by the entrance of two totally unadorned sea nymphs. They swam and played, like two children unaware there was a world beyond them. They stood in waist deep liquid, embracing each other, droplets of water sparkling off their bodies as the stars smiled down their light.

When they could no longer stand not being able to complete what they had already begun Samantha suggested they finally initiate the mat on the gym room floor. Giggling like school girls they pulled themselves out of the pool, bid good evening to their imaginary sea mates and grabbed their robes, heading for the gym.

The mat that had avoided being christened the first time Samantha had been shown around the Center came to be no longer virgin territory. The lovers explored each other passionately, taking turns reaching orgasms and finalizing the episode of romance with the two of them climaxing together under the moon and the stars . . . in the middle of the center gym . . . in the early morning hours of the day of the open house . . . with parents two floors above them, sleeping soundly. Resting in each others arms they did the unspeakable, the one thing they did not want to do after this particular early morning escapade -- they both fell soundly asleep.

Continued in Part 15.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.



**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself and to my daughter, Nicole, for constant encouragement. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## **Part 15**

### **Chapter 15**

Panic was the first emotion to show in sapphire eyes as the first bit of light sparkled on the windows and streaked down to touch the faces sleeping peacefully on the mat. "What the . . . Oh Shit . . . Samantha -- Wake up!"

"Wake . . . what . . . Alex . . . Oh, Shit!" Emerald orbs took on a similar expression.

"Quick, Honey, we've got to get upstairs." Alex looked around. "Clocks, we need a few clocks in this place. I know it's early, I just hope Kelley isn't up and walking around."

Like the wayward children they had portrayed the evening before, the two women quickly rubbed the sleep from their eyes, put on their robes and headed for the elevator.

As luck was with them, all was clear, no one was in the hall and they were laughing uncontrollably by the time they reached the kitchen. Alex looked at the clock on the microwave and saw that her inner alarm had done its job, waking her up at least by seven. She was just glad that Kelley's hadn't done the same, or at least that they hadn't ventured from their rooms.

Tears of laughter trickled down her face, "Whew -- that was close. What could we have been thinking, falling asleep down there with Mom and Kelley upstairs?"

"I guess it was the release of all the tension of the day." Green twinkling eyes still moist with glee looked up into a smiling face. "At least that's my excuse. What's yours? And . . . good morning, Alex."

"It is now . . . wasn't so sure it was going to be." She pulled the smaller woman close and hugged her good morning. "Well, this is the beginning of an extremely busy day, what better way to start off than with a rush of adrenaline. Wanna take a quick shower with me?"

"Who could resist such an elegant invitation?"

Alex gave her mate a lop-sided grin and they headed off to the bath. "No funny stuff in the shower. Agreed?"

"Funny stuff, whatd'ya mean, funny stuff?"

A mock look of agitation crossed the face of the dark-haired beauty as she turned, picked up the smaller woman and continued to the bathroom. "You know precisely what I mean. We stop acting like children just because my parents are here and get through this day like the adults we are." Kisses roamed the sweet smiling face in her arms as her lips trailed from ear to ear, stopping momentarily to taste the soft, full lips of her lover. "Don't make me act like this during the day! Consider yourself warned. No looking like an angel, no seducing me in front of the clients, no . . . damn, Samantha . . ." They had reached the door to the shower. Alex put Samantha on the floor and they dispensed with their robes. "I don't have time to ravish you right now and for some reason that makes the thought of doing so even more enticing."

Samantha grinned up at her lover, "Always wanting what you can't have, huh Alex?" Small hands traced circles around erect nipples.

"Normally, I would give you three weeks to stop that, but as time would have it, I think a cold shower is in order." It was a stretch, but Alex reached the cold water facet and turned it on. She placed her hands under Samantha's armpits and picked the smaller woman off the ground, carrying her forward into the shower in front of her.

"By the Gods, Alex! That's Cold!"

"Yes Samantha, that's the idea." The hot water facet was turned on after the initial shock and the two began lathering up.

For the first time since they'd been together each of the women washed themselves only while they shared the shower water. Not that there wasn't a glance here or touch there, but the threat of the hot water being extinguished by the other partner was enough to keep their attention continuing on the chore at hand.

After all the activity directly before slumber the evening before, Samantha was absolutely famished and she did not fail to convey this fact to Alex as they were getting dressed. "What are we going to do about breakfast?"

"The caterers will be here around nine and should be all set up and ready to go when the first guests arrive, hopefully around noon," Alex started to explain.

"Wait -- no, no -- just wait. You don't **really** expect me to not eat until noon, do you?" The look in her emerald eyes was a difficult one to decipher.

Alex wasn't sure whether it was a questioning look, an accusing look or an *I'm gonna kill something to eat if I have to* look. She decided to go with levity and continued to tease. "You serious, Samantha? You can't wait for the caterers to finish? Well, you know I could distract one

of them while you sneak enough to tide you over," she smiled broadly as Samantha stood looking at her in disbelief.

"You're kidding . . . tell me you're kidding . . . I see a smile, that must mean you're kidding."

Not wanting to really frustrate Samantha who was now standing directly in front of her with her hands on her hips, Alex went on, "Listen, Mom's favorite meal is breakfast, there will be no getting around not having it as long as she's here, so no need to worry. Someone will cook while we're getting the caterer's settled I'm sure." Resolving all Samantha's fears of not getting to eat breakfast, she gave the smaller woman a kiss.

Crisis time came next for Sam as she tried to figure out what would be the best outfit to wear. She kept going between casual slacks and summer dress, finally deciding on the dress. Alex, of course, had no problem - everyday casual business suit. Finally satisfied with the way she looked, or at least as satisfied as she was going to get, Samantha was greeted with a long, low whistle.

"I thought I told you not to put temptation in front of me today. Don't you listen to anything I say?" came the affectionate scolding for looking beautiful.

Samantha twirled around in front of Alex, teasing, "I did my best. I'm sorry, want me to take it off?"

"Don't even start to go there!" She pulled the small blonde close and kissed her, then took her by the hand and walked her out of the bedroom into the living room. Just as they started across the room they heard a small knock on the outer door.

"Girls, you up?" came the familiar voice of her Mother.

"Yes, Mom, come on in." Alex turned and gave Sam a quick kiss on the cheek and a smile that said, *Okay -- now the fun begins!*

"Morning Honey. That was our second knock, one more and we would have been in. I thought maybe you overslept which I know is unusual but . . . then I remembered that we left plenty early last night, early enough for you to get a really good night's sleep." The tone of her Mother's voice had a hint of sarcasm in it.

"So, did you girls have a nice evening after we parted ways last night?" There was a twinkle in Kelley's eyes that was unusual.

"It was okay. Just a quiet rest of the night and an early bed, just like you guys." Alex wrinkled her brow in a puzzling look while answering her second mom.

"Early night?" Aurora chimed in, "Alexis you never were very good at telling simple lies. You can match with the best of them on a business venture, but when it comes to a little personal lie -

- you just can't do it, at least not and look your Mother in the eyes." Twinkling sapphires matched guilty ones.

Doing her best to keep from breaking into laughter Aurora explained, "Last night after we left here I wasn't feeling that tired. I finally, after another glass of wine, talked Kelley into going for a swim with me in that lovely pool you have downstairs. We could see that you hadn't set the security alarm and I thought it might be fun to initiate your pool with a little skinny dipping."

There was no need for Aurora to continue the conversation, Samantha turned and buried her crimson red face in her lover's chest with an involuntary, "Oh, No!"

"Mom!"

"Alex!"

"The two of you!" Kelley interrupted. "Aurora, look how you've gone and upset the half-pint."

Furrowed brows above emerald eyes peeked around to snatch a look at Kelley at the reference that could have been made for none other than her.

Kelley continued, "Okay, Aurora, fun's over for a while. Listen girls, she did talk me into going for a swim and we were well on our way to the pool when we heard the splashing. Knowing you have a lot of your Mother in you, Alex, I figured you had the same idea and we didn't go any further. Not that your Mother didn't want to. I told her she had best know Samantha a lot better before making such an assumption, so we quietly turned around and went back upstairs. You had better be happy that the pool has a slight echo when the Center is empty." She grinned broadly at the two young women in front of her.

Placing a hand on either side of her lover's face, Alex lifted it to stare into a still brilliantly red complexion. "Welcome to the Family, Honey."

"Oh Alex, I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be silly -- you had a great idea and simply beat us to the pool. It could have been the other way around, you know?" Aurora finally changed the subject. "What do you suggest we do for breakfast? I'm starving."

"See, I told you the two of you had a lot in common. She's as obsessed with breakfast as you are." Alex grinned. "Why don't you fix breakfast, Mom? Or talk Kelley into doing it. The caterers and Ray and Sonny are all due here around the same time, which is somewhere close to nine. I'm sure the guys will be hungry when they arrive so if you've made something like waffles and breakfast strips, they will keep until everyone can eat."

Looking over at her lover she got the nod of approval and answered her daughter, "Okay, I think we can manage that. Waffles and breakfast strips sounds good enough to tied us over until the caterers are all set up, the place is swarming and lunch is available."

The older woman walked over to where the two younger women were standing. "Samantha, as Alex said -- Welcome to the Family, honey." She put her arm around Sam and gave her a little squeeze.

"Now, tell me, are you girls going to decorate the Center today?"

"No . . ." Alex started to answer . . .

"Yes" Samantha chimed in at the same time.

Alex looked over at her mate puzzled. "We're decorating?"

"Of course we're decorating. It's an open house."

Alex was totally taken back with the answer from her lover. "When are we going to have time to decorate and what kind of decorating are we doing?"

Knowing Samantha had one up on Alex she beamed over at her lover. "We're not personally doing it, silly. You left me in charge of certain things, remember. Well, I called a little company in town who does decorating for parties. They will be the ones decorating today. What's an open house without balloons? They'll be here about the same time everyone else is expected -- nine o'clock."

"Well, great. Decorating didn't even enter my mind . . . must be the artistic part of yours and Mom's." She looked over at Kelley and winked.

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After quickly giving the Moms a tour of the kitchen to acquaint them with where things could be found, the younger women started downstairs to open up and await the arrival of the caterers. Samantha's stomach made a growling sound as they left the kitchen. She smiled up at her lover who merely shook her head and returned the smile with a nod to the kitchen. Samantha ran back in and grabbed a banana.

"This might keep me from embarrassing myself in front of strangers before I get to eat my morning meal."

"Be back up in a half hour," Aurora called after them. "I think you'll have time to eat before the crowd arrives."

On the way down they decided to divide and conquer in opening up the Center. Alex would open the doors and then go turn on the lights to accentuate the climbing wall, while Sam would start the Jacuzzi's. There wasn't a lot to be done other than that.

On her way back from the pool, Samantha heard a familiar voice ringing through the reception area.

"I know someone is here, the door's open," came a loud tenor voice.

"Sonny!" she acknowledged as she sped up to meet her friends.

"Don't you look like the picture of sunshine this morning? Your directions were perfect from the airport. This place looks fantastic on the outside. Love the doors!"

"They are beautiful aren't they," she agreed with her friend. Giving them each a kiss and hug she asked how the flight down had been and the drive from the airport.

Looking around and not seeing anyone, she suggested they go find Alex.

"No need," came a soft contralto voice from the direction of the gym. "Who could help but hear when you arrive, Sonny?" Alex came around the corner wearing a big grin, walked up and gave her friends a welcoming hug and kiss. "Mom and Kelley are upstairs making breakfast. Anyone hungry? I do believe we might have just enough time before the day really gets to rolling along."

"Breakfast, what a marvelous concept," Ray chimed in. "Sonny was in such a hurry to get to the airport we didn't have time for food and then they give us a banana and a cup of coffee on the plane and called it breakfast. I'm starving."

"When did my other favorite girls get here?" Sonny wanted to know.

"They arrived yesterday around noon." Alex filled him in.

Looking at Samantha, he smiled broadly, "How did meeting the in-laws go?"

"Quite well actually," came the answer from the small blonde. "There were a couple embarrassing moments, but I think for the most part they like me okay."

Alex stood there shaking her head and smiling. "They liked her more than just okay, guys. She was a big hit. Even Kelley seems to have taken her to heart." She put her arm around the smaller woman and started walking everyone in the direction of the elevator. "So, shall we go eat," she motioned for all to enter the lift and they proceeded to the third floor.

The little group decided that Sonny should go in first and surprise Aurora. The reunion of the two of them was like watching two people who hadn't seen each other in decades. All the hugging and kissing -- the "you look marvelous" -- "you look pretty damn good yourself" -- seemed to be endless. Finally Kelley calmed them both down announcing that only those who could be quiet for a little while could sit down and eat because the meal was ready.

Breakfast was a joyous occasion for all the friends. Kelley made an orange juice toast to friendship and new beginnings and the meal was quickly in progress. They had followed Alex's suggestion and had made Kelley's famous waffles, melted butter and hot maple syrup with breakfast strips, breakfast patties and a pitcher of orange juice. Even Samantha was full by the time the meal was finished.

They were all sitting around just gossiping when the intercom buzzed and Alex went to answer it.

"That's the caterers and the decorators, so it looks like both Samantha and I need to get down and help with directions."

"You girls go right ahead," Aurora looked around at the remaining people at the table, her eyes coming to rest on Sonny. "We'll clean up here and then be down to join you." She gave them a "shoo" with her hands and a nod of her head implying that they had better not keep the people downstairs waiting. "Besides we have a lot of gossip to catch up on that no one else is interested in. You can take Kelley and Ray with you if you'd like."

"Thank you very much, but I think Ray and I can do what we want. We don't need to be farmed off onto anyone's team," came the quick reply from the other side of the table. "As she said, you girls get going. Those people need to get started and finished before your guests arrive. Ray and I can take care of ourselves." She shook her head and smiled at Alex, giving the younger woman one of the looks she had come to know as *You Know How Your Mother Is!*

Alex smiled back and grabbed Samantha's hand, "Come on, 'second in command' -- time to go face the lions."

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Samantha beamed when she saw her wards coming through the door with not only the balloons they had already inflated but a helium tank in case they needed more, which she most surely knew they would. She loved balloons and the festive look they gave an occasion such as this. She planned on having the Center overflowing with them. Her motto was that crepe paper, streamers and balloons could do wonders for any occasion.

Alex took the caterers in tow and led them to the area in the gym where she and Samantha had decided to put the tables of food. They had brought three long tables which were to be set up along the far western wall along the windows.

Occupying the middle spot was an ice swan sitting in the middle of a champagne fountain and surrounded by soft drinks.

Directly to the left of the beverages were cold cuts of every variety imaginable with a larger selection of cheeses than normally would have been supplied, due to the fact that Alex knew there would be many vegetarians at the affair. Of course there was an assortment of breads, rolls and condiments to go along with the cold cuts.

Fruits were abundant in the form of watermelons that had been scooped out and refilled with not only their own fruit but with cantaloupe, grapes and honey dew melon as well.

Of course the usual salads were brought: cole slaw, potato salad and mixed green with a medley of dressings.

Alex had ordered several hot dishes as well, not only the usual Swedish meatballs and little hot dogs but an avocado, cheese and crab dip, shrimp scampi, penne in marinara sauce and a lobster newburg with rice.

The piece de resistance was the two decorated cakes. She knew a baker who was also an artist and made special stencils to be used with colored chocolates to decorate cakes. She had one vanilla cake made and one chocolate; each was decorated with half the building and half the name of the Center. When the two cakes were placed side by side the building was complete. In large lavender letters, Alternative loomed above the building on the cake on the left and Paradise on the right section with the remainder of the cakes being trimmed with lavender flowers.

By eleven o'clock all the caterers and decorators were out of the building. The server staff would be back at 11:45 as contracted. Alternative Paradise was clothed in crepe and balloons awaiting the first real visitor to come through the beautiful stained glass doors. There was a huge Open House sign on the building, as if the lone warehouse could have been missed by anyone who had directions to get there. By the looks of the finished results this was one exquisite affair that had been meticulously planned. Two very proud "partners" stood, arm in arm, looking at the completed project. Samantha smiled up at her lover, "Congratulations Alex, looks like your dream has reached fruition."

Alex bent down and gently kissed the soft lips that eagerly received it. "Congratulations to the both of us -- this will be our dream in the making if you'll share it with me."

"I already am, my darling," was the response she received.

"I saw Kelley showing Ray around a little bit ago, but I haven't seen hide nor hair of the other two. They're probably still upstairs gabbing away. Believe me Samantha, those two will give you a run for your money in the talk category."

Alex, took Samantha by the hand and walked her over to the windows. "I think we ought to taste this champagne and make sure it's what I ordered," she stated as she filled two glasses. The gym was totally empty save for the two lovers and that's the way the tall, dark-haired beauty wanted it to stay for just a little while. Reaching into her pocket she brought out a small black velvet box, opened the lid and showed the contents to the petite blonde who held her heart.

"By the Gods Alex . . . what . . ." tears of joy misted over sparkling Irish eyes as she stared at two small hearts joined at the middle with a single diamond. "It's beautiful, but Alex you shouldn't have."

"Here, give me your hand," Alex said, ignoring the protest and slipping it onto the ring finger of Samantha's left hand. "It's only a token, Samantha, a promise or commitment ring, if you'd rather. I'd like for you to wear it as my commitment to you and I couldn't think of a better time to give it to you than the opening day of the Center.

A single tear ran down the smaller woman's face as she thanked her lover for the ring. "I'll never take it off," she vowed.



Winking at her Alex commented, "You will when I buy you a larger diamond."

Samantha started to counter, but was hushed as fingers gently closed her lips and an ebony head shook from side to side. Alex handed her a filled glass of champagne and lifted her own up to toast. "To my beautiful angel, I thank the Goddess every day for her letting you enter my life."

Samantha lifted her glass to match, "To my champion, the warrior of my dreams. To new beginnings as we continue to walk the same path through this life."

They drank the sparkling liquid and embraced. In the throngs of a passionate kiss they did not hear as company entered the room until the sound of clapping hands reached their ears.

"Enough now girls, you have company and more on the way. No PDA (public display of affection) don't you remember the old rule?" Sonny interrupted in his high tenor voice.

"I knew it was too quiet to be true," came the quick remark from his old friend. "What did you do with my Mother?"

"She's walking around looking at Samantha's handy work while in search of our two missing companions."

Unable to contain her enthusiasm Samantha walked toward her friend, "Sonny, look what Alex just surprised me with." She held out her hand to let him examine the sparkling adornment on her finger.

"Will you look at that. Alex, you really are spoiling this child." Sonny smiled over at his old friend while holding Samantha's hand. "It's absolutely you, Sweetie. If I were you I would simply consider that I was definitely worth it." He smiled again and gave the small woman a hug as he whispered into her ear, "You are quite the lucky young woman, my friend."

Samantha whispered back, "I totally agree with you, Sonny."

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Time was getting short and the serving staff arrived all decked out in their white shirts, black ties and black pants. Kelley and Ray had finally made their way to the gym, but Aurora was still walking around somewhere when a brilliant flash of light blinded the party of five. Before their eyes had a chance to acclimate, Alex heard a voice from her past, "Can't have an open house without pictures. What kind of a celebration would that be?"

"Goddess bless me! Scoop! If you aren't a sight for sore eyes, and I mean that literally." Alex grabbed her old friend and hugged her tightly. Turning to Samantha she put her arm around Scoop's shoulder and introduced the smiling, auburn-haired Amazon who stood eye-to-eye with Alex. "This is Scoop, La Jolla's own famous freelance photographer. She could always get the high pictures when no one else could!" Scoop, this is Samantha, my better half; Sonny and his

better half Ray and you already know that tall drink of water over there, even though you probably don't recognize her with all that distinguished coloring in her hair.

Kelley gave Alex an *I'll get you back later* look and smiled at the young woman who had been in high school the last time she had laid eyes on her. "You've changed a little yourself there Scoop."

"I have a feeling I'll be seeing a lot of people today who will look a lot different than they did the last time I saw them," Alex added.

Before the conversation got a chance to turn to the present, another voice from the past rang loud and clear into the room, "Hey there, "Little Sarge." Looks like I finally get to look up to you instead of the other way around." Alex turned to look into the face of a stout middle-aged Master Sergeant whose voice prompted her to unconsciously straighten her shoulders. Despite the drastic change in appearance of the owner of the voice, the coarse alto sound was as familiar as it had been when she was ten years old.

Alex's expression took on that of a surprised child, "Sarge! I don't believe it! Did Mom and Kelley send out their own separate announcements to this affair? What a great surprise!"

Open arms invitingly beckoned the younger woman to receive a huge hug. "When Kelley called I couldn't resist the temptation to see what my "Little Sarge" had become. It's really good to see you again, Alex, so grown up and beautiful."

Samantha smiled as she watched her lover blush in the teddy-bear arms of an old family friend.

"Damn, where are my manners?" She broke away from the strong arms and grabbed Samantha's hand. "Sarge this is my lover, Samantha and these are my friends Ray and Sonny -- everyone this is Sar . . . Jude."

"I'm glad to meet all of you. It's been a long time since I've seen this little girl here," She put her arm around Alex's shoulder, "and I can say from the heart that I'm mighty proud of the accomplishments she's made, according to what her parents have told me. I wouldn't have missed being here today for anything." The large woman smiled at the younger and then released her to go over and talk with Kelley.

Aurora finally found her way back to the now more populated area and was surprised at the new faces that had arrived in her absence. People started filing in slowly and soon everyone in the original party was busy showing someone around the new Center or pointing them in the direction of the refreshments. Even Sonny and Ray had become knowledgeable tour guides by the middle of the afternoon.

A few more old friends unexpected by Alex trickled in during the day, a couple of women Kelley used to play softball with, a writer friend of Aurora's, and a few of her favorite clients. Alex's friend

Marcy from San Diego showed up with her new girlfriend and they had a little time to chat while Alex showed them around the Center.

Samantha was otherwise occupied with invited guests, lecturers who wanted to see where they would be speaking, a massage therapist who wanted to see the massage rooms and some of the people she used to work with at Flying Fingers. Suzanne and Danny made a short appearance, looking rather uncomfortable until they spotted Samantha. She proudly gave them the royal tour and then marched them in the direction of the food. Suzanne couldn't believe the spread, and Danny had no problem with helping himself to the extravaganza.

Somewhere between showing people around and talking small talk, Samantha found the time to sneak off by herself and put Alex's paperweight on her desk. It seemed like such a small gift after the surprise Alex had materialized this morning, but it was heartfelt and she knew Alex would appreciate the thought.

She looked down at her dazzling ring and smiled. Since she had met Alex her life had definitely taken a turn for the best. She never dreamed she could be as happy as she was today and the future looked as though it was just going to keep getting better. She had been in a hurry from her own office to get Alex's present in its place and decided to take a few extra minutes to go back and straighten up the small amount of clutter she had left.

Opening the door to her office she noticed that someone was in the room. "Excuse me, can I help . . ."

The person standing facing her desk quickly turned to face Samantha, "We meet again, Brat."

"You . . . what are you doing here? Who are you? Why do you keep calling me Brat?" Samantha was livid.

Penetrating feral eyes stared back at the small blonde who had been caught off guard, "It's an Open House, isn't it? I do believe that means that anyone walking along spotting the sign is more than welcome to come on in."

"Answer my questions! This is getting ridiculous." Sam's Irish was beginning to boil, churning a little bit of sourness into what had, up to now, been a marvelous day.

"Okay, Little One -- don't go getting yourself so upset." The tall, thin blonde slithered closer to Samantha, closing the door on her way by giving it a quick shove. "We're F-a-m-i-l-y, you and I."

"I don't think so," came the quick reply from the smaller woman as she tried to back away from the other but found herself cornered against a wall.

Playing with words the transgressor continued, "Oh, but we are, Sammie dear. Let's just say I'm a friend of an old friend."

"You're talking in riddles. I know I don't know you and Alex made no acknowledgment that she knew anything of you, either. So . . . who are you?" Samantha put out her hands to keep the taller woman from coming any closer, to no avail.

Samantha winced as strong, forceful hands grabbed her own outstretched ones, pinning her up against the wall. The taller woman bent down and brought their faces practically nose to nose. "You're a Brat because you get everything you want. We're family because I said so. This is my game and I intend to continue playing it, got that? I like keeping you in the dark; I like keeping everyone in the dark. I'm not finished with you yet Samantha. You'll know when I am. You need to suffer a little more first, get a real taste of the grown up world."

"Why?" Samantha almost cried, unable to stop the tears from forming in her eyes. "What did I ever do to You?" Samantha tried to wiggle away from the taller woman's grasp.

"Stop struggling, it's futile, the stronger woman pushed her entire body against Samantha's. "You don't want to make a scene now do you and ruin your lover's party?" the psychotic blonde sneered. "I'm not going to hurt you . . . Yet."

A sardonic grin crept across the face of the intruder, "You see, Samantha, you are just the means to the end, my ace in the hole! You just happened to get mixed up with the wrong person at the wrong time." She let go of one of Samantha's hands and took hold of her chin pulling her head back and her face up. She brought her own face ever so close to her victim's. "Tell Alex I said hello," she smirked, leaning even closer and planting a kiss on the soft lips of the terrorized woman in front of her. As Samantha tried to pull away the kiss turned into a bite, leaving an immediate bruise in the corner of Samantha's lip.

Smiling broadly the villainess released the fear-struck smaller woman, turned and opened the office door. "Nice place you have here, Samantha! I'd love to stay and play . . . but . . . Gotta Go!"

Samantha stared at the closed office door as she walked around the desk and sat down in her chair. She put her head in her hands and began sobbing uncontrollably. She couldn't imagine anyone being so evil just for the sake of being so. She didn't know the woman and still didn't even know her name. She knew she would have to quickly take advantage of all the lessons available to her at the Center so she would be able to at least protect herself if the woman got close to her again and got any more physical than she already had. She opened the top drawer and took out a small compact with a mirror. Examining her face she could see that the area of the bite was swollen and already of a slight purple color. *How am I going to explain this to Alex?*

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There were almost more visitors than Alex had anticipated as she watched half the town of Laguna come through her doors. Of course the turn out was encouraging and she graciously showed each new group around or relayed them on to someone who was beginning a new tour. Others just milled around on their own admiring the view and the layout of the huge Center.

She had just finished giving a short talk to an excited group of rock climbers who were interested in the climbing wall. They were thrilled that they would be able to climb even during the rainy season and wouldn't have to go all the way to San Diego or one of the larger cities north of them to participate in the sport. Deciding to take a quick recess from the chaos, she slipped quietly into her office to catch her breath before she needed to be charming, smiling and social again. Coming around to the front of her desk she spotted a small silver foil wrapped box with a gold bow strategically placed directly in the middle of the desk. As she looked at the handwriting on the card she knew it was from Samantha. Smiling to herself, she opened the card. She could almost hear Samantha's voice as she read . . .

*To My Alex:*

*A gift to celebrate your new endeavor. May we always Balance each other perfectly.*

*Yin/yang (My Forever Love)*

*As two sides of the same coin, we're different as night and day.  
But with opposites attracting, there could be no other way.  
I felt the draw of Destiny the moment you came near.  
I knew with all my heart and soul that I belonged right here.*

*The intertwining of our paths was written long ago.  
We've been here many times before, don't ask me how I know.  
Our souls are joined forever on this trek though space and time.  
Our love and loyalty prevails, You always shall be mine.*

*All My Love Forever ~ Samantha*

. . . with eyes misted over and trembling hands she opened the small box to find a yin/yang paperweight. One side of the design was done in a beautiful cream-colored mother of pearl and the other in the darker iridescent colors of an abalone shell. The poem alone was a beautiful gift but this was really special. What a perfect sentiment for the opening day of the Center. The opening of her door brought her quickly back to the present as Aurora walked into the room.

"Alexis, people have been looking all over for you, what are you doing in here alone?"

"I just needed a minute to myself, Mom." She held the paperweight out. "Look what Samantha had sitting on my desk waiting for me to find. She's really something Mom." The younger woman smiled at her Mother.

"Yes, Alex, I think you may have found the pot at the end of the rainbow this time," her Mother agreed. "I get really good vibes from Samantha. Maybe I can stop worrying a little about you now." She walked over and hugged her daughter. "I'm really proud of what you have accomplished. This place is going to be fantastic; I can feel it in my bones. But . . . the reason I came searching for you . . . Marge just arrived. You need to come out now and show her around."

"I will." Alex placed the paperweight back on the desk and put the card into her pocket. "I need to find Samantha first. I haven't seen her for a while."

"Alex, Marge is waiting . . ."

"I'll be there just as soon as I find Samantha, Mom. I'm sure you can keep her occupied until I do." She kissed her Mother on the cheek and escorted her out of the office, closing the door behind them.

Alex started looking over by the pool area, then went back to the climbing wall. She scanned the gym and still found no Samantha. Thinking perhaps that her lover may have also needed a moment of quiet reflection, she headed for the elevator and Samantha's office.

After skirting around several groups of people on the second floor and exchanging pleasantries, Alex finally succeeded in winding her way to Samantha's office. She opened the door and found the small blonde with her head down on the desk. At first glance it seemed as though she might have been napping but slowly the head raised and teary emerald eyes searched the only face she wanted to see. She had tried to cover up the bruise with makeup but could see from the look in her lover's eyes that the job had not been accomplished, most likely because of the swelling.

"What the Hell happened to your lip?" came the almost involuntary question. It was definitely not the way she had intended on greeting Samantha when she found her.

"I . . . ran into a door . . ." came the quiet response that was most certainly not the truth.

"And I have a bridge to sell you over the ocean in Arizona," Alex countered. "Seriously, Samantha," she walked over and lifted the smaller woman's chin to take a closer look at the bruise.

Samantha stood and threw her arms around her lover's waist, burying her head in Alex's chest. "That woman was here, Alex."

"What woman . . . the tall blonde who's been stalking you?"

"Yes," came the soft reply.

Alex's temper started to get the best of her as she took Samantha by the shoulders and looked her in the face, steel blue eyes shooting daggers at the wrong victim. "Why in Hell didn't you scream, or try to call for help? How did she get close enough to do this to you? How did she do this to you?" Unintentionally she was shaking Samantha as she vented emotions on her lover that were meant for the blonde enigma.

"Alex, you're hurting me," Samantha pleaded with her. She lifted her arms to break the hold the taller woman had on her. "I just walked into the office and she was standing at the desk. I asked her a couple questions but she refused to answer most of them. Then she was at me . . . she told me not to make noise and ruin the open house . . . it sounded logical . . ."

"Logical -- it sounded logical to let her do whatever she wanted to you without making a sound so as to not disturb a PARTY? Samantha what were you thinking?" Alex practically screamed at her.

"I guess I wasn't," Samantha yelled back.

"What did she hit you with that made a bruise only on your mouth? She could have knocked out a tooth!"

Samantha's eyes lowered as did her voice, "She didn't hit me, she bit me."

Alex looked puzzled. "Excuse, me . . . I don't think I heard you correctly." She lifted Samantha's chin to make eye contact which the smaller woman again avoided. "Samantha, did you say she bit you?"

"Yes," came the soft murmur.

At this point Alex was fuming, she grabbed Samantha by the shoulders. "How the HELL did she get close enough to bite you?" Just trying to imagine the scene made her blood pressure rise.

Samantha looked up into angry blue eyes, as her own began to tear again, "She had me pinned up against the wall. She's a lot stronger than I am, Alex. I felt totally helpless. She said, '*Tell Alex I said hello,*' then she began to kiss me . . . I struggled and tried to get away and she bit me." Tears were flowing freely by the time she finished the explanation and she tried to turn away from the almost skeptical stare of her irate lover.

"You don't Believe me! I can see it in your eyes! You **don't** Believe Me!" Samantha pulled away and started out of the room.

"No, Samantha," Alex quickly grabbed the smaller woman and turned her back around to face her. "Of course I believe you. It's just . . ." she shook her head and pulled Samantha close. "Of course I believe you . . . wait 'til I get my hands on that bitch, she'll learn to leave people alone."

"I'm so sorry, Alex. This has ruined an absolutely wonderful day for you," Samantha sobbed into her lover's chest.

"Don't be ridiculous, Honey. I'm sorry it had to happen to you. I'm sorry I wasn't around to stop her. But I'm here now, Samantha, I've got you and you're safe now." She gently kissed the top of her lover's head and held her close. "I came to say thank you for the beautiful poem and paperweight."

Samantha looked up at Alex, a smile glistening through her tears, "Do you really like it?"

"Of course I do, silly. And the poem . . . I have no words to describe the way the poem made me feel except that you definitely can put my feelings into words. Come on now, let's go get you freshened up a little. We still have people to meet. A few more hours and we can kick back and

relax. Marge just arrived and I can't wait for her to meet you." She smiled at Samantha and wiped away the last of the tears with her fingers. "A little makeup and the mark will be hardly noticeable to someone who doesn't love you." Bending down she kissed the abused corner of her lover's mouth. "I love you more than life, Samantha. I promise I will avenge this violation."

"Oh, Alex, I would rather that we never set eyes on her again, but I know that isn't to be the case. She said she wasn't finished with me yet. I think I need to start taking some self-defense lessons as soon as possible."

Totally agreeing with the small blonde Alex suggested she enroll in the first class the Center had to offer and promised to work with her in the evenings when they had time. In her mind's eye she played her version of what would happen the next time the blonde stranger appeared. She would be there to protect Samantha. She would make sure it was the last time the interloper had a chance to upset her, or anyone else for that matter.

The crowd was beginning to thin and the day was finally coming to a close. They stopped to let Samantha wash her face and apply some makeup to the bruise then proceeded back downstairs to the gym area.

Everyone in their little group was gathered over by the buffet tables, finally getting a chance to stop entertaining visitors and indulge themselves in some of the delicacies everyone else had been enjoying all day. Aurora was standing with a glass of champagne in one hand and a plate in the other when the two younger women walked into the room. She handed her plate to Kelley, who gave her a, "*What do you want me to do with this?*" look, and marched over to the prodigal duo.

"Where have you girls been? I was just about to send out a rescue party." Looking first at Alex and then at Samantha, a small frown appeared on her face. "Samantha, is something wrong? You look as though you've been crying . . . what happened to your mouth?"

"Mom," Alex chided.

"What?" Aurora countered.

"Aurora, it's okay," Samantha began, "I'm a bit of a klutz at times and walked into an open cabinet, nothing big, just annoying and ugly to look at." She touched the offended area and gave the older woman a half-hearted smile.

Aurora walked over and gave her a hug. "Well, it doesn't look all that bad. Once the swelling goes down you won't even notice it. Here, have some champagne, that will take away the sting of it at least." Turning she gave Alex a raised eyebrow that expressly told her daughter that she didn't believe a word of what the small blonde had just said and that she expected to be told the truth at a later time.



"Well, you're here now," Aurora continued, "Come on Samantha, I want you to meet one of my oldest friends," she smiled and whispered into the younger woman's ear, "And I do mean that exactly as it sounds." She marched Samantha away from Alex and started across the room.

Samantha knew the person Aurora was talking about had to be Marge. From the direction they were headed it could only be the woman standing over by the buffet chatting with Sonny, Ray and Kelley, looking like she was waiting for someone. She kept glancing at her watch as if she had an appointment and was running late. She did not match what Samantha had imagined. In her mind's eye she had visualized a bigger than life personality, strong enough to mold a willful personality like Alex's into a successful business tycoon. The woman before her could not have been more than 5'1" tall, but she did have an aura about her, the way she stood perhaps, that did seem to carry an air of authority.

As they approached the frown on the woman's face disappeared and a smile took its place. She reached out a hand. "This must be my Alex's Samantha." Her handshake was warm and firm. "I've hear a lot about you, girl," she smiled at the younger woman. "So, you are going to be the second in command in this little venture of ours?"

"Samantha," Aurora interjected, "This -- if you haven't already guessed, is Marge Silkton. She just wanted to make an appearance today to see the finished Center and to meet you." Aurora grinned at Samantha, knowing the last statement would probably cause the small blonde to blush.

"It's great to meet you Ms. Silkton . . ."

"Marge, call me Marge, Samantha," the older woman interrupted.

"Marge then . . . Alex has told me so much about you. She thinks the world of you," Samantha admitted for her lover.

"The feeling is mutual, my dear. Alex is very close to my heart, she's the daughter I never had. And . . . she was My second in command until this little Center of ours came into fruition. Now, I can't even stay for dinner because I have to go tend to a client in Santa Fe who would have originally been taken care of by someone who is now otherwise occupied." She smiled broadly to let Samantha know she was only kidding.

"Speaking of my nonexistent second in command . . . Where is my little entrepreneur? She needs to give me a tour around this place." Looking around she spotted Alex talking to a small group of people who were getting ready to leave. She caught the younger woman's eye and motioned at her watch. Alex nodded and walked the group to the front door, hurrying the goodbyes as diplomatically as was possible.

It wasn't long before the rest of the visitors trickled out of the building leaving just "the family" and the wait staff. Once they were told the party was over the staff had everything packed up and ready to leave within the hour. It felt a little strange to see the left over balloons, crepe paper and streamers hanging around in the now empty gym that had been bustling with people just a bit

ago. Kelley, Aurora, Ray and Sonny went upstairs, leaving Alex and Samantha to do the locking up.

The two women stood looking out at the dusk colored sky in silence. The day had not turned out exactly as planned with the little interruption that had taken place near the end of the day but the beginning had been joyous and hopefully the ending would be the same.

"You certainly got your share of pleasant surprises today, 'Little Sarge,' Samantha broke the silence with a giggle.

"Oh, yeah. But don't think you can go using that old nickname on me."

"I'll bet you had a lot of other nicknames, too, didn't you." Samantha prompted.

"Yes, but you don't need to know them all! Some are quite embarrassing. I'm sure as time goes by Mom will make sure you know all of them and the little stories that went along with them." Alex put her arm around Samantha's shoulder and drew her close.

"Your friends seem very interesting, Alex, especially the photographer. I think she got some really good shots of the Center and of us. I can't wait to see the proofs. It was nice of her to come and surprise you like she did. It's a shame they all couldn't stay longer. We'll have to have another party soon and make sure to invite them all back."

"Scoop and I had been pretty close in high school but with all the traveling we've been doing lately we lost touch like a lot of friends do. Leave it to Mom to bring everyone back into the fold on a special occasion like today. She's really good at stuff like that, it's one of her best traits, and I love her for it. A party sounds great as soon as we get over all this initial opening stuff and get settled a little."

Samantha sighed, "Both your parents seem to be very attentive to your needs, Alex. Maybe it's because you're an only child. You really are a very lucky daughter to have people who love you so deeply. Watching them interact is very interesting, they seem like night and day . . . kind of like the two of us . . . I hope that's a good sign that we will last as long as a couple as they have. There's a quiet tenderness in the way they still look at each other. It's like a smoldering kind of love that continues to burn long after the intense heat of the bonfire is extinguished." She looked down at the ring on her finger and smiled, then looked back up at Alex and kissed her. "We had best get back upstairs with family and friends before someone comes searching for us."

"Yes, but first let me properly thank you for the lovely gift you left for me today. The mood was spoiled the first time I tried." The taller woman drew the small blonde closer to her, looking deep into green pools that reflected back the love that glowed in her own eyes. "I love you Samantha."

Gently she tilted the face she adored closer to her as she leaned down to tenderly kiss the soft full lips. Samantha's half opened mouth accepted the tongue that flicked softly around the inside of her mouth. She moaned as Alex's tongue intertwined with her own. Samantha's tongue in return ventured to find an eagerly awaiting open mouth. The sweetness of the kiss elicited love bumps

over her entire body. She pulled her tongue back, and broke the kiss, her knees buckling beneath her.

"By the Gods Alex, we have to go upstairs and face you parents and our friends. All I want to do is stay down here and be engulfed by your love. You are making a nymphomaniac out of me, do you realize that?" she giggled.

A huge grin was her answer as Alex picked her up and carried her over to the mat that they had awakened on this morning. She laid her down and placed her own body on top of her lover's.

"No you don't, Alex Dorian." Samantha protested, pulling her dress back down over her thighs. "I will Not have family or friends innocently coming down in that elevator and happening upon a sight I do not wish to share with anyone!"

"What a party pooper you are!" Alex pouted.

"You wouldn't continue with what you started any more than I would let you," Samantha responded. "You're just being a big tease."

"Bet me," came the response as a hand slipped back up Samantha's leg and into the elastic of her panties. Quick fingers found the soft wet area beneath the golden curls.

"Alex!" Samantha yelled and then lowered her voice, "If you don't stop that this instant, I won't let you continue later."

"But . . . that was almost a dare, and I never pass up a dare." The dark-haired beauty teased, not moving her hand from its destination.

"It wasn't a dare Alex and if you don't stop, I'll be forced to . . ."

Simultaneously they heard the clank of the elevator as it stopped on the silent first floor. Alex jumped up, pulling Samantha with her.

"See," the smaller woman whispered, "I told you we'd get caught this time."

Alex just smiled and started toward the elevator, reaching a hand out behind her back for Samantha to grab on to.

As usual, Kelley had been chosen to come and get the girls and find out what was taking them so long. She made sure to make a lot of noise with the elevator doors and getting out of the elevator as she could still remember what it was like when love was new and didn't really want to walk in on anything. "Okay, kids . . . time to join the rest of the crowd," she called ahead as she walked toward the gym only to be quickly met by Alex trailing a slightly blushing Samantha behind her.

"We've all decided that there wasn't enough food at the party to tide us all over til morning so we're going for a late dinner. It's come as you are or you can dress down, whatever you want,"

the older woman informed the two younger smiling. "Sonny's talking your Mother's head off, telling her all about your trip to San Francisco and the new addition to their gym. Ray is watching TV and I got to come and get you two."

"Well, weren't you the lucky one," came the sarcastic reply from her daughter, "I know you would have just loved to have stayed and listened to Sonny go on and on and on . . ."

"Don't be a smart ass, Alex. By the way you two really pulled off an amazing Open House. I think everything went smoothly and everybody seemed to enjoy themselves. I do believe you will have a huge turnout when you open up for business. So, next week you're having orientation for your employees, right?"

"Yes," Alex answered. "I've asked everyone who is going to be working with us, including some of the instructors to come by Tuesday morning to get acquainted with the areas where they will be working. We have a few regular employees and then a clean up crew that will come nightly. Between Samantha and I we should be able to have everyone situated by the end of the week and be able to open up the following Monday."

"Looks like it's going to be another busy week ahead then." Kelley turned to the newest addition to her family. "Didn't you say your parents were coming in on Friday, Samantha?"

"Yeah, they're coming for the Pageant of the Masters so we will be making a double trip to the program."

Kelley looked over at her daughter with a half-grin, "You ought to be full of culture by the end of next week."

"Stop gloating," Alex mock commanded. "Or I'll find something that only Mom would like and buy tickets for the both of you."

"Okay, okay -- truce. We had better be getting back upstairs before they send Ray down to find me as well as you two," the older woman suggested.

The rest of the evening seemed to speed by. Dinner was casual and fun, the conversation flitted between a variety of topics including the Open House, the San Francisco trip, the business, Sonny and Ray's business, Kelley's brokerage and how California real estate kept escalating. There was never a dull moment and never a pause in the conversation. They closed the restaurant and headed back to the house to continue visiting.

It was almost three when Kelley finally called it an evening for all. Ray was sound asleep on the couch, she and Alex had just finished going over some of the financial aspects of the business and the other three were still sitting on the floor in the living room, pillows propped up all around them, drinking their wine and talking.

"Okay, "girls" -- we all have a busy day and night tomorrow. What do you say we get some shut eye before the sun comes back up?"

After a few whines and whimpers, everyone got themselves together and headed off to their various bedrooms. Samantha had gone into the bathroom and Aurora pulled Alex out into the hall, telling her to walk with her to their rooms.

"Okay, what gives?" her Mother questioned.

"What do you mean?" came the evasive response from her daughter.

"Alexis, don't play me for a fool! What happened to Samantha's mouth. You didn't think I'd forget that quickly did you? I know she didn't run into an open cabinet. I'm not that stupid. You two didn't . . ."

"Don't even start to go there, Mom! Samantha and I Don't have that kind of relationship. This is not Nikki all over again. I won't be in that ever again!" The vehement look on her daughter's face rang true to what Aurora felt in her heart, but she had to ask the question that had been burning in her since she first saw the bruise on the young blonde's mouth.

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that. I thought as much, but . . . never mind . . . so what did happen to her?"

Alex filled her Mother in on most of what the problem was, explaining that they really didn't know what the problem was and that she was sure there would soon be a climax to the entire situation. She intended to be with Samantha the next time something happened and end the escapade once and for all. Aurora warned Alex not to get too physical and not to go beyond the law when it came to taking care of the culprit. Alex explained as calmly as she could that she had every intention of getting even with the stranger for hurting Samantha but that she had no intentions of landing in jail over the situation. With her mind put at rest Aurora kissed Alex good night and told her that she and Kelley were proud of the way everything had been handled so far in the Center. Alex said good night to her Mother at the door and yelled in a good night to Kelley who yelled back. She shut the door and hurried back to Samantha to spend a few minutes alone before the evening was entirely over.

Samantha was standing in her favorite spot, in front of the middle window in the living room, looking out over the ocean. She heard soft footsteps enter the room and without turning around knew her lover was near. The sweet fragrance of Obsession permeated the air around Alex and as she drew near the odor intensified, filling Samantha with a soft, glowing feeling. "I love Laguna Nights, here alone with you. I look out at the ocean and the beach and feel like we are kin to those two parcels of Mother Earth. Look how the ocean cannot keep from touching the shore, that's how I feel whenever you are near. If two such miracles can respond in this way to each other, there can be nothing wrong with us, as mere mortals, following suit and doing the same toward one of our own.

A slight touch on her shoulder created a tingling sensation that moved quickly down her back. She turned to look up into the face of her dark angel who leaned down to receive a kiss.

"It's been a busy day, My Destiny," Alex whispered, "tomorrow will prove to be no less. I think we should turn in and get some sleep while we can."

The two lovers took one last look at the view they both loved before turning in. They each caught sight of the falling star that the heavens had sent as a good night gesture. Two identical wishes were made as they clasped hands and walked toward the bedroom.

Continued in Part 16.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself and to my daughter, Nicole, for constant encouragement. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 16

### Chapter 16

Even though the sun was having a difficult time peeking through the cloud cover, Alex's inner alarm went off and she awoke to a gray colored sky. Gently untangling herself from Samantha's hold, she slipped out of bed and into the bathroom. She showered and dressed, smiled over at the still sleeping imp in her bed and went into the kitchen. For sure Kelley would be up already so

she opened the door to the hall, a sign that at least someone was stirring on this side of the building. She poured a cup of tea and went to sit in the living room and wake up completely.

"Glad to see you still retain some of your old habits. It's nice to occasionally have company to watch the sun come up," a familiar voice rang through the living room as Kelley helped herself to a cup of tea. "So, is Samantha a late sleeper like your Mom?"

"Yeah, the more I think about it, the more I realize that I've fallen in love with my Mother. That's a scary thought, you know," the younger woman smiled over at her parent. "But then, you've put up with Mom for a long time, so I guess that's at least a good sign."

"Samantha seems sweet, Alex. I hope this lasts for you. I would love to see you settled down and happy for a change." Her eyes twinkling, she added, "We may even get to have a grandchild?"

"I wouldn't go that far, Kelley. We've never talked about kids. I don't even know how Samantha feels about children. We've been too busy just getting to know each other and getting this business off the ground."

"I won't push it, but you know how your Mother is. She'll be dropping little hints in no time, I'm sure." She smiled at her daughter, "I think her biological grandmother's clock is ticking."

They both got a good laugh out of that one, with Alex just shaking her head and putting up her hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Tonight should be interesting, Alex. I think we'll all enjoy the show. Aurora made sure we got the same seats as last year so we're real close to the stage."

"I think the theme has to do with the end of the millennium, doesn't it?" Alex asked.

"It's called 'The 20th Century: Ten Decades of Arts,'" Kelley informed her daughter. "I've heard that they have taken out the final scene, you know, DaVinci's Last Supper and replaced it with Salvador Dali's Sacrament of the Last Supper, in keeping with the 20th century agenda. As I said, it should be interesting."

Alex suggested that they start waking the others up, but Kelley said to let them rest a bit longer for the day and evening would be quite long.

One by one the stragglers trickled into the living room. Ray, then Aurora and finally Sonny came shuffling in, heading for the teapot. Sonny let out a remark about not having coffee and Alex pointed him in the direction of the instant. He wrinkled his nose and settled for finding some tea that contained caffeine.

Alex shook her head and professed that if they were to wait for Samantha to wake on her own they would be having lunch instead of breakfast. The consensus was to go out for breakfast and then down to the town for a little shopping. Alex headed for the bedroom to awaken the straggling sleeper.

A gentle shake barely got a rise out of the slumberer. "Let's go sleepy head; everyone else is up and dressed."

"Why doesn't anyone ever let me sleep until I wake up on my own?" came the soft whimper from the small blonde as she rubbed her eyes.

"Because if we let you wake up on your own, we'd miss the entire day and probably some of the evening," replied her lover bending over and giving her a good morning kiss. "Don't whine, it's not becoming. Everyone is up, dressed and hungry. You have exactly 15 minutes to get up and ready or we'll go out to Eat without you," she whispered into Samantha's ear.

Green eyes opened wide to the magic word 'Eat.' "Okay, I'm up and on my way to the shower . . ." She entered the bathroom, "See me starting the shower . . ." she reached in and turned on the water "15 minutes, I'll be good to go in 15 minutes, don't you dare even think about leaving without me!" came the final comment as she disappeared into the shower stall.

Alex laughed, shook her head and walked into the living room to tell the rest of the troupe that the final member had joined the living and would be ready to go in the allotted amount of time.

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The morning sped quickly by and window shopping turned into a shopping spree for Aurora and Sonny, who insisted on stopping at a nursery for some large dwarf trees for the Center as house warming gifts. They purchased two palms for around the pool area and two citrus trees. Kelley talked the man into delivering them immediately and the small caravan started back to the warehouse, trailing a pickup full of trees, under a sky that had finally decided to clear and let the sun shine through.

The Pageant was still hours away, so Kelley suggested making a large pitcher of margaritas and having a pool party to celebrate the newly acquired shrubbery. She received no objections, so proceeded to the kitchen area while everyone else headed to their various rooms for swimming attire. The afternoon followed the morning in speed and early evening was quickly upon the little group. It had already been decided that they would eat after the main event so they had snacked throughout the afternoon along with the liquid refreshments.

Samantha had taken this extra time to get to know Aurora a little better and to ask her opinion on how to inform her parents that she was a lesbian.

"You know Sam," Aurora began, "everyone takes news like that differently. How do your parents feel about homosexuals?"

"I don't really know how my Mother feels, we've never talked about it, but I know that my Father thinks it's terrible. That's why I'm afraid to tell him, I don't know how he'll react to me." Samantha looked deep into Aurora's eyes, hoping the guru of positive thinking would have the magical answer that would make everything all right and easy."



Aurora looked at the young woman with compassion but could not give her the answer she desired, "I wish I could tell you to take that leap of faith and just tell them, but if your Dad is homophobic there is really no telling what his reaction might be. Perhaps the best thing is to let him meet Alex first and get to like her just as your friend. After all they don't live in the area and you don't have to deal with the issue on a daily basis."

"But, there will be Thanksgiving and Christmas coming up and I refuse to be without Alex for our very first holidays together. Explaining to my parents that I'm bringing someone home for a family gathering would be really difficult and I know Alex would want to spend some of the holiday time with you two and I'd have to explain that, also." Samantha was beginning to get misty-eyed and her voice was starting to crack.

"Samantha, I think the best thing is to let it ride for now. Don't stress over it. Think positively about it at night before you drift off to sleep and give yourself some time. You'll be seeing your parents next week. Don't even attempt to bring up the subject during that meeting. Give them time to get used to your new environment and your new friend. Let them see how happy you are and how much fun it is to be with Alex. Keep it light this first meeting." She smiled at the young woman and drew her near to give her a motherly hug. "I'm sure it will all work out as it is supposed to. Remember we are all where we are supposed to be and there is nothing that happens without a reason. Even bad things have a reason."

"I'm sure Mom and Dad will really like Alex. After all . . . what's not to like?" She smiled at the older woman, the sparkle back in her eyes just thinking about her lover who was busy racing in the pool with Ray and Kelley.

Sonny who had just come in on the end of the conversation heard the word Dad and asked Samantha what he did for a living.

"He's a salesman. Pretty high up in the company, he's District Manager over about 20 other sales reps covering a couple states. His main areas are Washington and Oregon with branches out to Utah and Idaho, mostly the far northwestern part of the country." Pride showed in Samantha's face when she talked about her Dad and it made Aurora angry to think that this man could possibly turn against his own daughter because of who she fell in love with.

Sonny widened his eyes and smiled at his friend, "That sounds pretty prestigious, what's the name of the company he works for?"

Water droplets hit Samantha's shoulders making her squeal in response as Alex came up from behind dripping and leaning over to kiss her on the neck. "Company Who works for?" she butted into the conversation.

"Alex -- that's cold!" came the reply from the small blonde, "and . . . company my Dad works for."

"Okay, I'm curious . . . what company?" Alex just smiled as she shook her head like a puppy spraying water all over her lover.

Samantha wiped herself off and threw the towel at Alex, "I shouldn't even tell you for that but since Sonny asked . . ." she turned and faced her friend, " . . . Dad works for a large medical supplier called ZZ Medi-aide."

"No!" came the almost involuntary response from the wet, dark-haired beauty standing over the small gathering.

"What do you mean -- No?" Samantha asked.

Alex squatted down in front of her lover, putting her hands on Samantha's shoulders. "Please, honey, don't tell me your Dad is a big wig at ZZ Medi-aide. Please tell me you're kidding."

Samantha looked in wonder at the reaction she was getting from Alex, "Of course he works there, and has for 25 years. In fact, he's a damn cornerstone. What's the problem? Alex, you actually look pale."

"Samantha, ZZ Medi-aide is one of the biggest competitors Have It All has. Marge Silkton and Dick Sanstein are arch enemies. "I've gone rounds with more of their sales reps than I care to acknowledge and have taken quite a few accounts away from them when they thought they had everything all tied up with a ribbon. Whatever you do, don't mention Have It All around your Dad, and especially don't let him know that I am associated with the company. Damn . . ."

"It's okay, Alex, don't go getting so upset. I'll just introduce you as the owner of Alternative Paradise. Dad doesn't need to know about Have It All." Samantha patted Alex on the shoulder like a small child. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I know, honey, I just wasn't expecting that particular company to come out of your mouth." Alex shook her head and smiled at the small gathering. "I'm sorry, I probably overreacted, it was just a shock."

"I think it's time we all headed for the showers," chimed in Ray, changing the subject. "It's six o'clock and that will give us all an hour and a half before we have to leave for the amphitheater."

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Sitting out under the stars meant that dress was casual and everyone was glad the clouds had dissipated, leaving a clear evening sky. This would be the first Pageant for Ray, Sonny and Samantha. Kelley reminded everyone to keep their ticket stubs as they needed them to get into the festival in the morning. Aurora was anxious to see the reactions of the newbies to the 'living pictures' they were about to experience.

The program explained a little of what they were about to see and there of course was a list of all the scenes that would be portrayed. A great majority of the paintings to be enacted were going to be Norman Rockwell's from the 1940's and 1960's. On the list was "Rosie the Riveter", "USO Volunteers", "Picasso vs. Sargent" and "Astronauts on the Moon." Kelley was anxious to see the George Segal white plaster human figures because two of her favorites, "The Commuters" and

"Rush Hour" were on the bill. Ray was interested in seeing the display from "The Great War." It seemed like there was going to be something to please just about every artistic palate.

The orchestra played an introduction and the program started promptly at 8:30 with 'International Exposition from 1900'. Alex had to laugh at the expression on Samantha's face. When the curtain rose, the small blonde's mouth dropped open and her eyes got as big as saucers; she had no idea the type of display that was going to be on the stage when the curtains opened. There were a series of bronze and porcelain reproductions, painted people who stood absolutely still and looked exactly like the object they were imitating. She couldn't believe people could stand still for that long, until Sonny reminded her of the plaster man they had seen up in San Francisco.

The reproductions of the paintings had everyone in awe; there were even frames around the scenes to complete the illusion that a life-size painting was being viewed. No one was disappointed in the enactment they had picked as their favorite. Samantha was especially fond of the recreations of the 1950's album covers which they had entitled "Rock Legends." Toward the end of the evening the audience was privy to an open curtain while the performers were preparing the next scene so everyone could see how they were orchestrated. All in all the evening was a smashing success and Samantha said she would have no trouble whatsoever sitting through the entire experience again the following Saturday night.

The only moderately uncomfortable time throughout the entire evening was that during the intermission Samantha was slightly jumpy. Ray, Alex and Kelley were standing in line for refreshments, Aurora had gone to the ladies room and Sonny observed that Samantha had an uneasy look on her face as she seemed to be searching the crowd. When he questioned her as to why she seemed so edgy, she told him it was just that there were so many people and she wasn't used to such crowds. The answer seemed to pacify her friend and he suggested that they go look at one of the souvenir booths. Had the truth been known, she was afraid of running into the psychotic blonde who seemed to have a knack of showing up at any affair Samantha was attending since she had met Alex. She didn't want a confrontation here at the Pageant and especially not in front of Alex's parents. Samantha certainly didn't want her new in-laws thinking she was going to be bad luck for their daughter. So far it seemed to her that she was well accepted into their little family and she surely wanted to keep the consensus in her favor.

When the show was over, Alex suggested a restaurant on the waterfront a little further south on Coast Highway, away from the pageant crowd. It was a quiet little place which didn't remain so once the entourage arrived and spotted the piano bar over in the corner. Kelley and Ray convinced the two "show people" to contain their talents until after dinner and promised that after dining they would be allowed to give the patrons the pleasure of hearing their lovely voices.

Dinner, dessert, two bottles of champagne and many, many songs later the small troupe was headed back toward Laguna to sleep off the intoxication of a night of pleasant memories.

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Even with only a few hours sleep, habit would not allow Alex or Kelley to sleep long past the rising of the sun. They greeted Sunday morning before any of the others knew the morning had

arrived. The festival opened at 10 a.m. and they figured the rest of the party could sleep in a little before needing to be awakened. Alex made tea and they sat and talked about the future of Alternative Paradise, the escalation of real estate prices in California and the change in Alex since Samantha came along.

Kelley totally approved of Samantha and had no trouble conveying that fact to her daughter. It had been a long time since Alex had brought someone home who both of her parents approved of and, in actuality, the feeling was a rather good one. Early morning moments such as the ones they were sharing gave the two women some special time alone, time they occasionally needed to cement the bond that tended to be pulled apart in times of adversity. Even though she knew Alex was a grown woman, Kelley found it difficult not to give Alex her opinion, an opinion that more frequently than not Alex did not agree with. The two had butted heads more often than they would care to remember but always seemed to find a special time to bond again and make the relationship right. As in the old poem about the child not growing under her heart but in it, the connection between the two was as close, if not closer, than if they had been blood relatives. Actually, Kelley's strong hands had been the first to cradle Alex, as Kelley had been helping in the birthing room, had cut the umbilical cord and was the one who handed the newborn to an anxiously awaiting Aurora.

They had finished off the first pot of tea and as Alex got up to make another, Kelley suggested that perhaps it was time to awake the sleepers and get the day started. Alex totally agreed and said she would, of course, get Samantha who would probably be the most difficult to awaken, if Kelley would get the rest of them up. That settled they took off in opposite directions.

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"Here we go again, Samantha. It's beyond sunrise and almost out of early morning. Sunday's here and the day is going to be a busy one. Time to get up."

The still somnolent woman placed her hands over her ears, grimaced and shot her lover an evil look through slits of green, "Do you have to be so loud about it? My head is killing me."

A crooked grin appeared on Alex's face as she stood towering over the suffering Samantha. "That's what you get for trying to keep up with the pros. When it comes to champagne and late hours, Mom and Sonny can't be beat. But it looks like the late hours and champagne took their toll on you, huh, Samantha? I'll make you a concoction that will stop the headache and have you fit in no time . . . but you must promise to get out of bed immediately with no more fussing."

"Anything if you can make my ears stop ringing like Quasimodo is inside my head swinging on the bells." Samantha put her head back on the pillow, still holding her ears.

Alex gently helped her out of bed and pointed her in the direction of the bathroom. "I'll be right back, get your butt into the shower."

"Yes, boss," came the whispered sarcastic reply as she started the shower running. "But you had better be back here with my fix by the time I'm through."

It didn't take long for Samantha to finish showering, when she opened the shower door Alex was standing in front of her holding a tall glass full of red liquid.

Dripping wet Samantha stared at the glass of remedy. "What is that? Please don't tell me you expect me to drink it. I can smell it from here."

Alex cocked her head and recited the ingredients, "Let's see . . . tomato juice, vinegar, lemon juice, onion, sugar, celery, Tabasco sauce, salt, pepper and a package of E-mergen-C, all blended together."

"Yuck," was all the hangover victim could manage, with a look on her face like the cure was going to be worse than the ailment.

In the most reassuring tone Alex could muster she explained, "I know it sounds terrible, Samantha, but it really will work and you'll be feeling better before you're even dressed -- I promise."

"Easy for you to say . . . you aren't the one who has to drink it . . . by the Gods it smells terrible!" She took the glass from her lover and holding her nose downed the entire glass without breathing. "You could have at least brought me a cracker or two to ease the taste when I was finished."

"You're very welcome. I don't think I've ever heard anyone more grateful." Alex took the empty glass and began to leave the bathroom.

"Come back here," the small blonde ordered.

"Who could refuse such a sweet invitation?" Alex turned around and walked back toward her still wet lover.

Samantha threw her arms around the taller woman's waist and looked up into devoted eyes. "Thank you Alex, I appreciate the trouble you went through to try to ease my suffering, even though it did taste like dirty socks."

"When was the last time you tasted dirty socks? Have you been keeping something back from me? Do you have little obsessions I don't know about?" Alex grinned and kissed her lover on the forehead.

"Very funny, Alex. Just how many of those drinks have you drunk?"

"More than I care to acknowledge," came the prompt reply. "Now, it's time you got this beautiful naked body of yours clothed, before I decide to let the rest of the party go ahead to breakfast and dine right here on you." Alex ran her hands down smooth, damp shoulders, fondling breasts as her slender fingers caressed the small form in front of her. She bent down and kissed the eagerly awaiting lips that quickly parted to allow a tongue entrance.

Samantha purred, "I love you Alexis Dorian." The still suffering blonde had completed the whisper without allowing her lips to leave Alex's.

"Ditto my little sailor. No more drunken nights for a while unless we take precautions before you start drinking and before you go to bed." Alex squeezed her tightly then stepped back. "I really must let you get dressed, everyone else is probably close to being ready to leave." She turned and started to walk out of the bathroom.

"You don't have to worry about the drinking. I don't intend to have another of these headaches for a very long time. Of course your Mom and Sonny are leaving this evening, so I will have no one around to corrupt me further." She smiled and gave Alex a little shoo gesture with her hands, then proceeded to finish drying and started the dressing process.

Alex stepped into the living room to find it still empty. She walked over to the guest suite and knocked on the door. Kelley answered the knock with, "Come in, it's open."

"I just wanted to see how you two were coming along. Samantha is out of the shower and dressing. I ought to give Mom and Sonny a piece of my mind for plying Samantha with all that champagne last night. She's not used to drinking like they are."

"Alex, stop playing mother hen. She's a big girl. Everyone should have at least one decent hangover in their life. At least then they know how they never want to feel again." She patted her daughter on the back. "Your little cure all should be working fairly soon; it always worked quickly for you if I remember correctly." She smiled and walked toward the bedroom. "I'll go check on your Mom and we'll meet you over at your place. Why don't you go see how the boys are coming along?"

Alex nodded and left the suite, closing the door behind her. As she turned the corner toward the guy's room, she spotted Ray coming down the hall toward her.

"Sonny's just about ready. He really tied one on last night," there was a twinkle in the usually solemn man's eyes. "A hangover's good for him once in a while, humbles him, and champagne is just the drink to do it."

"Well, he's not in that boat alone today. My Samantha has the hangover of her life. I gave her a cure all and hopefully she'll be better in a short time. A couple more glasses of juice and she should be rehydrated. I hate to see her in such pain, but she should have known better." Alex shook her head and the two friends walked toward her living area.

Within minutes the stragglers all appeared in the living room. Strangely, the three of them all seemed to have the same distant look on their faces, although the two older late comers did not have quite as pained an expression. The three individuals who had not tied-one-on the night before all gently chided the three musketeers. Alex fixed two more cure all drinks and a glass of orange juice for Samantha. Her Mother insisted that she did not have a hangover but Kelley nodded for Alex to continue with the remedy. The consensus between the sober three was that

everyone needed to be in peak condition for the busy day that was planned so after playing last night it was time to pay the piper.

By 10 o'clock everyone was prepared to leave. Aurora reminded them all that they needed their ticket stubs from the night before to get into the festival. Ray suggested they take the car he and Sonny had rented and then park it in one of the lots and take the shuttle bus up to the event.

Alex scooted in next to Samantha in the back seat and whispered into her ear, "You feeling better than you did when you woke up?"

"I sure am! As terrible as that concoction was to drink it did fix the foggy head, the pain and the desire to visit the porcelain throne on my knees. I think the extra juice probably helped a lot too." She smiled at the beautiful face beaming at her and kissed her on the cheek. It felt great to be able to be herself in front of Alex's parents which brought to mind the ordeal they were going to have to go through this time next week when it was her parents they were taking to the festival. The more she thought about them coming down the more she wished they would call and cancel. The twinkle in her eyes must have changed because Alex got a serious look on her face and started to say something. Samantha kissed her own middle and index fingers and put them to her lover's lips while shaking her head slightly and smiling. Alex took the hint and did not question the flash of a blank stare that had appeared on the small blonde's face and just as quickly turned back into a sparkling smile.

They arrived at the lot not expecting the turnout to be quite as large as it already was. Even with the crowd, it seemed as though the Festival attendants had everything under control and the shuttle buses kept coming one after the other to fill and quickly leave. In less than a half hour after they had left the house they were standing at the entrance to the Festival of Arts.

"Shall we try to all stay together or go our separate ways and fix a time to meet?" Ray wanted to know.

Kelley looked at the group and commented, "I think we should all walk together for a while, at least until we find a food booth and get something in our stomachs. Then we can walk together for as long as seems feasible and if a couple wants to go a different direction then we'll set a time. Does that sound reasonable?"

It seemed as though the idea sat pretty well with everyone. Samantha looked at the program they were given as they walked through the gate and immediately spotted some of the refreshment stands. They looked for something everyone could eat and headed in that direction.

Unusual for such a large group they seemed to have no trouble staying together. Conversation picked up after bellies were full and headaches were extremely diminished or completely eradicated. The atmosphere was more formal than the SawDust Faire had been but the artistry was superb. The variety was abundant as there were painters (oil and watercolor), charcoal sketch artists, pen and ink displays, sculptors, ceramic works and jewelers just to name a few of the categories.

Free workshops took on a different tone as the six exceedingly different personalities all converged on them at once. They all tried their hand at pottery, having to first adorn themselves in full length aprons. Ray gave up after two collapsed vases; Alex gave up after three. Sonny had a grand time making a dish while Aurora and Samantha ended up with mugs. They left their treasures to be fired while they continued down the path, writing down the number of the booth so they would be able to find their way back later in the day.

The area in which Ray shone was the watercolor workshop. He ended up with a beautiful sunset that was actually good enough to be framed and hung. Even Sonny was surprised at his mate's talent and assured him they would find a suitable frame when they arrived home.

Aurora bought a painting that reminded her of a Thomas Kinkade. The artist seemed to have the same ability to play with the light and make it seem as though the painting had a luminosity of its own. The scene was that of a cottage by the sea at sunset and she told Samantha that they could put it up in the guest suite and then she would be able to admire it every time she and Kelley visited.

Occasionally Samantha found herself patrolling the crowd in anticipation of spotting the dreaded blonde, but her fears were thankfully unfounded. She was careful not to upset anyone else as she continued her search. Each time she looked for the horrible woman her spirits would fall, but she was immediately compensated with elation when her search yielded no sign of her evil nemesis.

The rest of the day pleasantly unfolded and they took time to stop, relax and listen to the different musical groups that were seen on stages scattered throughout the area. Aurora and Kelley were partial to the classical while the other four were more interested in the jazz. They sat and listened to a jazz quartet when they stopped for lunch around two o'clock and the rest of the afternoon seemed to speed by.

Everything had pretty much been seen by the time five o'clock rolled around and everyone was more than a little tired from walking. Alex commented that she didn't remember walking that much at Disneyland the last time they were there to which Aurora replied maybe not but that they walked more than that at Disney World. Samantha got in on the conversation by stating that she would gladly walk as much at either Disneyland or Disney World as she had been a deprived child (with a large grin on her face) and had not gotten to go to either of the Happiest Places on Earth. Alex promised that Disneyland would be an easy wish to fulfil and that Disney World would be put on their list of things to do before they got too old. Sonny, of course, chimed in that you never get too old for either of the Disney establishments and Ray suggested the conversation end and they start back to the car.

The shuttles were still running both up to the Festival and down to the town and were overflowing with patrons going in both directions. The little group arrived back at the warehouse close to six and Sonny and Ray headed for their room to add the trinkets they had either purchased or made in the workshops at the Festival to their luggage. Ray wanted to make sure everything was packed and organized long before it was time for them to start to the airport. Kelley suggested that they do the same and the two older women took off for the suite. Alex and Samantha stood and looked at each other smiling. Alex leaned down and whispered in her lover's



ear. "We'll be totally alone for the first time in four days in about 2 hours. Mom and Kelley plan on leaving the same time as the guys." She kissed Samantha on the cheek. "Do you have plans for the rest of the evening?"

"Why, I don't believe I do. Alex, what did you have in mind?" The small blonde batted her eyelashes and smiled innocently, barely able to keep from laughing.

"I thought perhaps a nice warm Jacuzzi, followed by a quiet evening just enjoying one another," came the quick reply as an eyebrow raised and a crooked smile crossed the face of the beautiful dark-haired woman. "At least this weekend I could touch you without having to curb my actions too much. Come next weekend I don't know how I'm going to manage."

"I feel exactly the same way, Alex. I was wishing they would change their minds and decide not to come, but once Dad has his itinerary mapped out there's no changing it. I'm afraid we're going to have to suffer through the visit." A slight frown appeared where a smile had just been.

"Hey," Alex took her lover's face into both hands and tilted it up to look directly into moist green eyes. "Let's have none of that. It won't be that awful. As a matter of fact, I'm looking forward to meeting your folks and especially to meeting your sister. I just wish I could thank your parents for having you. If it wasn't for them you wouldn't be in my life right now." She kissed away the frown and it was replaced once more with the smile she could not get enough of. "That's more like it, let's go see how the guys are coming along with their packing."

They walked over to where Ray and Sonny were staying just in time to meet them coming out of the room.

"Well, we're all packed and ready to go," Sonny told the girls, "Ray's going to take the suitcases down and then we'll just have to get in the car and drive."

"Here," Alex offered, "let me help with those. You two go on over to the suite and talk with Mom and Kelley, we'll meet you back up there in a few minutes." She grabbed one of the large suitcases from Ray and he heaved a sigh of relief for not having to carry all the bags down by himself.

Sonny and Samantha started over toward the suite, discussing the next time either the guys would come down or the gals would venture back up to San Francisco. They found the suite door open so went in, preceding their entrance by talking loudly.

"Hello," Sonny bellowed, "You had better be decent because we're already in the room." He looked over at his friend and giggled.

Kelley came out of the bedroom area with a suitcase in each hand. She looked in the direction of Samantha and Sonny, "Aurora thinks she needs to pack for at least a week no matter how long we're staying. I think she put half the house in these bags." She placed the suitcases by the door and went and sat on the couch. "Make yourselves comfortable, she's closing up the overnight case and primping. Heaven knows why, we're just going in the car."

"I'll go make sure she hasn't left anything," Samantha said as she started toward the bedroom. She knocked lightly on the door before entering. "Aurora, are you decent?"

"Depends on who you ask?" came the quick reply. "Come on in, Samantha." Aurora poked her head out of the bathroom and smiled at the younger woman.

"So, do you feel a little more at ease about next weekend?" the older woman asked.

"Not really. I've resigned myself to the fact that I can't just blurt out to my family that I'm a lesbian, but not being able to act normally around Alex is going to be a real chore. I almost wish they would decide not to come down . . ."

"Don't say that Samantha, you don't really not want to see your parents, especially when they live so far away. There will come a day when they won't be around to visit you and you'll have an emptiness in your life. Your visit will go just fine and you and Alex can just be good friends for the weekend, it won't kill either one of you." She moved closer to the small blonde and gave her a hug. "It's really good to have you in our family. I'm glad Alex finally found a nice girl to settle her down."

Samantha began to blush.

"So, have you two talked about starting a family yet? I don't mean to rush you but I am at the grandmother stage you know and would love to be spry enough to do things with my granddaughter while I'm spoiling her!" Aurora smiled broadly at the now totally red-faced woman standing in front of her.

"Actually, we haven't talked about anything as serious as children. I guess we should because I don't even know where Alex stands on that topic. As for myself, I like kids and always had in the back of my mind that eventually I would settle and start a family of my own, but . . ."

"Well, I just wanted to put the thought out there . . . no hurry . . . next year would do just fine." She smiled again and then told Samantha that it was their decision, but she really would like to have a grandchild to love and spoil.

Kelley called into the room announcing that everyone else was in the living room and waiting for them to finish and join the group. Aurora picked up the packed bag and put her arm around Samantha's waist as the two of them walked out of the room.

The final visiting hour was spent reminiscing over the past few days, the success of the open house and the fun at the Pageant and Festival. No one seemed to really want to leave but the time approached and leaving was inevitable. Ray tore Sonny away from Samantha and Aurora with the threat of not visiting again. Even though everyone knew it was idle, it did get Sonny moving a little faster toward the car. Ray made Alex promise to bring Samantha up to San Francisco at least for the Halloween extravaganza in October, if they couldn't manage to get away any sooner. He extended the invitation to Aurora and Kelley. The two younger women made a commitment

and the two older women promised to consider the venture. Before long the guys were on their way to the airport and final family goodbyes were all that was left of the glorious four-day visit.

Kelley and Alex went back upstairs to retrieve the luggage, giving Aurora and Samantha a little more time to talk.

"You know, I feel as though I've known Alex forever," the conversation was started by Samantha. "It's like I've been away all my life and have finally come home. Not home to Laguna or any place in particular, but to Alex. It's like Alex is my home and wherever she is, that's where I belong, also.

"If you are truly soulmates then the feeling would be exactly like that when you finally find each other in this life," Aurora explained. "I know an excellent past life regressionist in La Jolla. If you're interested Samantha, have Alex bring you down as soon as you two can manage a weekend. Let me know as soon in advance as you possibly can because she's a very busy person and it usually it takes up to six months to get an appointment with her, but she's a good friend of mine and I could pull some strings for you."

"That sounds terribly exciting, but a little scary. I guess you've been through it, huh?"

"Yes, I went years ago and even talked Kelley into experiencing it. As it turned out, we've been together many times in the past. We've also been with Alex quite a few times," Aurora told the younger woman. "Who knows, we may have even been with you but didn't know who you were in this lifetime at the time we had our regressions."

"I would love to have a regression. Do you find out places you've lived as well as people you've lived with?" Samantha wanted to know.

"Oh, yeah. We've lived in Ancient Greece, the Hawaiian islands, China, Africa and of course North America to name a few of the places that have come through in the sessions. It surely is an experience. I've done it a couple times just to see what else might come through." She smiled at the small blonde. "It will be our treat for both you and Alex . . . if you can get Alex to do it. I haven't had any luck, but you might have an easier time getting her to go."

"I will definitely work on her, Aurora." Samantha smiled broadly just anticipating the adventure.

Changing the subject, Aurora got a bit more serious. "Samantha, I don't know how you feel about calling me Mom. You might want to wait until you know me better or you are with Alex longer. But whenever you are comfortable with the term, it's fine with me. I think we are all going to get along great and I have lots of stories to tell you about Alex when she was little." Aurora hugged Samantha and gave her a kiss on the forehead. It made the smaller woman think of how like her Mother Alex was in certain respects. She also had a warm, tender feeling thinking that Aurora totally accepted her as a daughter-in-law in such a short period of time. "Don't answer now -- just do it if and when it feels natural."

Echoing from the front of the building came the voice of Kelley, "Okay, ladies, conversation will have to be postponed to a later time and place. This little party of two needs to get underway and on the road before my lovely mate here decides I will be vacationing from the office on Monday . . . again." She turned to Alex with a mock look of indignation, "Did you know that the last time we went away for a weekend in Sedona, your Mother turned it into a week's vacation?"

"No, I don't think she mentioned that little feat to me," Alex grinned over at her Mom. "But if you have to be kidnapped and made to vacation, Sedona is a lovely place to do it." She looked over at Samantha, "Of course that will also be one of our little excursions. Probably in the near future as one of my clients called not too long ago stressing over the fact that I was too busy to fly in and help him with some expansion. I promised I would make it a priority as soon as the Center here was opened and running."

"You won't have to twist my arm to vacation, I can promise you that," came the response from Samantha.

Kelley motioned that the car was packed and it was time for them to get going. While Alex was saying goodbye to Kelley, Samantha again thanked Aurora for the dinner out, the Pageant and the lovely picture they had hung in the living room in the guest suite. She also thanked her for making it so easy to be a part of their family. Aurora told Samantha that making her part of the family seemed very natural to everyone involved, so it must be a sign that their relationship was destined to be a good one.

The young women switched parents and Samantha walked over to Kelley. Kelley gave her a hug and told her again how good it was to have met her and that she was thrilled to see Alex so happy. She whispered into the small blonde's ear to take good care of her "little girl", and of course Samantha promised that Alex would always be her top priority.

Both the parents had mentioned the fact that they knew Alternative Paradise was going to be a smashing success with the two girls working it together. They also knew that anything Alex had ever put her mind to had been successful and there was no reason for this business to be any exception.

With all the farewells said there was nothing Aurora could think of to do to delay the departure any longer. She got in the car and off they went, waving until the warehouse was totally out of sight.

Alex turned to her lover and sighed. "We are actually absolutely alone." She looked around and repeated herself then picked Samantha up and kissed her passionately. "I've been wanting to do that all day!"

"And what do you have planned for the rest of the evening?" Samantha asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Well, I thought we start with a glass of champagne . . ."

"No, I don't think so!" came the emphatic reply. "I won't be drinking champagne for quite a while. The memory of this morning's awakening is still much too clear."

"I do believe I suggested a nice warm Jacuzzi earlier today and then simply enjoying each other the rest of the evening. Do you suppose you could fit that into your schedule?" Alex smiled at the smaller woman standing in front of her.

"Oh, I think that could all be arranged," the small blonde smiled up at her lover.

"Marvelous," Alex made a sweeping gesture toward the building and with a slight bow bade Samantha to go inside. "The sooner we start the better," she smiled as Sam practically ran into the warehouse.

Unable to contain themselves in the elevator, Alex took Samantha in her arms and again kissed her as though she hadn't seen her in weeks. "Why does it feel like we haven't been together in forever?" she asked the small framed woman in her arms.

"I don't know, but I have the same feeling. It wasn't like we couldn't be ourselves around your parents or around the guys, it just seems like we haven't been alone." She giggled and hugged her lover close. "Well, we're alone now . . ." as the elevator stopped and the door opened she added, ". . . and at the top of the world."

They stepped out of the lift and Alex proceeded to turn on the security system so she wouldn't forget to do it later. With everything locked up and secure, she followed Samantha into the living quarters.

Samantha was already running the water for the Jacuzzi so Alex put some soft music on the stereo and poured them each a Mimosa sans the champagne. By the time she lit the candles in the bedroom the water had stopped running. The flickering light from the bathroom let her know that the scene had been set and was minus one of the major characters. With fluted glasses in hands she entered the bathroom, tall, dark and naked and slowly stepped into the warm tub, handing Samantha a glass as she seated herself beside her. "To Samantha, who handled the meeting of my parents with graciousness and savoir-faire," she tilted her glass toward Samantha's. As the glasses gently clanked Samantha added, "And to Alex who had the farsightedness to pick two lovely parents who would accept me for who I am." She smiled as she drank the pure orange juice and winked at her partner, "Ah, Mimosa just the way I like it, virgin -- which is not how I like my women."

Alex almost spit out the juice in her mouth as the last of Samantha's sentence hit her ears. "Your Women, did you say Women? And . . . just how many would that be, pray tell?" She looked over at her lover barely able to keep from laughing out loud.

"Oh, that really didn't come out right now did it? You know what I mean, that I'm glad you had experience because I am such a novice, but that's not what I said . . . but that's what I meant. Damn, for a bard I need some practice. Words should not come stumbling out of my mouth, they

should come trippingly off my tongue, sounding like music." She grinned and the flickering candlelight made her green eyes twinkle like the stars.

"By the Goddess," Alex exclaimed, "You are beautiful, Samantha." She put her glass on the side of the tub and reached for her lover's, placing it beside her own. "Come here, my beauty." She gently pulled the smaller woman close and tenderly embraced her. "It's nice to know that no one will be knocking on the door or rushing us tonight. I want to take my time and savor every inch of your softness." Samantha looked up into sapphire eyes filled with desire and knew that the attentive look was meant only for her.

"I love you Alex," she whispered as the sensuous lips she longed to possess drew closer and closer. She felt the tip of her Alex's tongue tickle the perimeter of her own lips and opened them slowly to allow her lover access to the moist pleasure within. As a moan began to escape from somewhere deep within her, Alex covered her mouth with her own, losing the murmur to the air but not to the ear. Alex smiled inwardly, knowing that she could pleasure her lover with a mere touch and a kiss yet she knew there was much more in store for the small beauty she cradled in her arms.

Breaking the passion of the moment Alex breathed softly into her lover's ear, "I think we've had enough of the tub for tonight. Ready to get out?" Getting an affirmative nod, Alex stood up and offered Samantha a hand as she reached with the other for the towels. Even the ritual of drying became a tantalizing affair. Alex wrapped a towel around herself and used the other to slowly and methodically dry Samantha, starting at her toes and working her way up the body, pausing momentarily as she reached erogenous zones. By the time she was finished drying Samantha, she was totally dry herself. So as not to break the tempo of the mood that had been so painstakingly set, she picked Samantha up and carried her to the bed.

The spread had been turned down and the crisp sheets seemed to welcome the lover's, affording them a cool touch to offset the heat that radiated between the two of them. Samantha lay on her back with her arms outstretched, beckoning Alex to join her and complete her as only Alex could.

The tall, dark-haired siren wasted no time in accepting the invitation. She nestled her face in golden locks as she nibbled at Samantha's ear, her breath causing love bumps to form on the smaller woman's body. "What's your pleasure, Samantha?" she queried her love. "What would please you most?"

Long, slender fingers trailed down the sides of the woman under her.

Receiving no answer, save for a whimper, she repeated herself. "Samantha, what would please you most?"

"Alex anything you do pleases me," came the reply.

"No, my love, tell me what you want. I want to hear it from you. What do you want from me?" There was a smile in the words but it was certain that the question needed an answer.

"I love it when you kiss me everywhere. The softness of your lips ...."

"Everywhere? Where is everywhere?" Alex continued as she eagerly kissed her lover's face, neck and breasts, stopping after teasing an erect nipple with her tongue. "Where mostly would you like me to kiss you?"

"Alex, don't tease," Samantha whined.

"Oh, but Samantha, I'm serious. How do I know what pleases you most if you won't tell me?" Still the smile came through in her tone, but Samantha knew her lover was serious and that the question needed an answer that only she could render.

"I want you to kiss my neck, which you already did and then my chest, which is where you are now . . ."

". . . And . . .?" came the reply quietly demanding a continuation of the description.

"Alex then I want you to kiss my abdomen and then my thighs and then . . . oh, Alex you know . . ." Samantha was sounding slightly frustrated.

"Samantha have you never been asked before?" Alex wanted to know.

"You know I haven't. I told you I had hardly even had sex with anyone before you and that what I did was mostly experimental. Alex . . ."

"Come on Samantha, you can tell me -- what gives you the most pleasure? Tell me the story, my bard."

"As if you didn't already know . . ." the small blonde smiled, knowing she was not going to get away with not telling Alex exactly what she wanted to hear. "I love it when you slowly kiss my entire body while your fingers are leisurely caressing me everywhere before and after your lips have reached the same areas. My heart begins to beat faster when you place your hands on either side of the inside of my thighs and kiss the area below my abdomen. As you gently open the folds below the mound and between my thighs, I hold my breath in anticipation of the ecstasy that I know will follow when you place your tongue inside where no one had ever done so before you. The sensations my body experience are almost impossible to describe, except to say that my entire being tingles at your touch, even at the mere thought of your touch. These are sensations I had never experienced until you loved me." She stopped and looked down at Alex who had rested her head on Samantha's stomach and was listening intently.

When the small blonde stopped talking, Alex looked up and smiled, "Go on, Samantha, I'm sure you haven't finished yet, would you like me to stop there . . . where you did . . . and continue no further? Is that all you desire?" she gave a puzzling look with a tilt of her head.

"You know I wouldn't want you to stop there, smart ass," Samantha grinned down at Alex whose mischievous eyes were twinkling. She sighed and closed her eyes as she visualized and relived in

her mind the last time Alex had made love to her. Samantha had never spoken words of love such as these out loud and even though it was Alex she was speaking to, she was still a little embarrassed at the way the words might sound.

"Alex, I am overcome with passion when you lick me softly and then with a quickened pace, until I can stand the intensity of emotion no more and am overflowing in my love for you and the fervor of the moment. It is at this point that you always seem to know when I have reached my outer climax and you enter me tenderly to complete the scenario of bringing me to an orgasm, the likes of which I had never in my wildest fantasies imagined." Samantha opened her eyes and looked down at her lover who was looking up at her with eyes an iridescent blue in the glimmering candlelight. "Now . . . Alex . . . are you satisfied?" She lowered her voice to a whisper, "Do you know how you make me feel? Alex, my love, do you know how I want you to love me?"

"Not only am I satisfied, I am totally enamored. Your wish is my command, my Destiny." She began where she had left off stroking Samantha's breasts and kissing her abdomen. Occasionally she would glance up into the face of love and smile, then continue as the dialogue had envisioned. Alex reached each area Samantha had described, touched, kissed and touched it again. She continued, her hands stroking as lips were kissing, lips kissing while fingers moved to a new location only to be followed by a flicking tongue and soft lips. When she parted the area between her lover's thighs and below the curly blonde mound Samantha could control her exclamations of pleasure no longer. Her breath quickened and her breathing became louder, causing Alex to grin and look at her face. "I love to watch you become aroused. Hearing your moans of satisfaction and anticipation heighten my own. Your desire seduces me . . ."

"Alex, don't stop . . ."

"I have no intention of stopping my love." Alex kissed the inside of each thigh as her fingers grazed the soft curls, then she kissed between the folds and as Samantha requested she began to softly lick the moist area, Samantha's movements continued to arouse Alex more and more. "I love you Samantha," she would murmur between flicks of her tongue. "I love the way you move . . . I love the way you feel . . . I love the way you taste."

True to Samantha's dialogue, Alex knew when the time was right to change her direction and enter her lover to finish pleasuring her. She maneuvered herself to straddle Samantha's leg as her own passion continued to grow. The more Samantha responded, the more she responded in like. As the rhythm increased from a slow, steady pace to a faster, yet still steady one, the two bodies moved in synchronicity. As Samantha began to reach an orgasm Alex could feel the pulsation within the small frame below her and her own exhilaration could no longer be contained -- she climaxed simultaneously with Samantha.

Alex held Samantha for a few moments until their breaths began to steady and become less rapid. She could still feel her lover's heart beating hard and fast beneath her and was hesitant to remove her fingers from within the moistness that was still pulsating, as Samantha muscles would occasionally tighten up around her fingers. The smile on both their faces would have been akin to the age-old adage about the smile on the cat that ate the mouse -- that of total satisfaction.



"Had anyone been in the guest suite they would surely have heard you, you know?" Alex teased her lover.

"You weren't so quiet yourself," came the quick reply.

Alex started to remove her hand only to find a smaller one on top of it, holding it in place. "Don't move that one inch, if you know what's good for you," Samantha whispered to her as she smiled. "I think we'll just sleep like this."

"I don't think I could remain in this position the entire night," Alex kidded back with her.

"Okay, if you insist." Samantha relinquished the fingers with a sigh. "You felt marvelous, Alex."

"So did you, my love."

"We have exactly four more nights alone before the Riley's will be descending upon us," Samantha reminded Alex.

"I think I can keep you pretty busy the next four nights," Alex countered, she blew out the candle on her side of the bed then rolled over onto her back waiting for Samantha to extinguish the other candle.

Samantha turned back toward her lover and snuggled up close in her now nightly position, holding Alex tightly. "It will be a long three days, but . . ."

"No buts, Samantha," Alex scolded. "The visit will be a pleasant one. You haven't seen your folks or your sister in a while and it will do you all good to get to see one another again. Besides, I want to meet the people who created the love of my life. I just wish I were able to thank them properly . . . maybe some day. Now, we need to get some rest, the week ahead doesn't leave much time for relaxation." She kissed Samantha on the forehead and squeezed her shoulder. "Goodnight my precious."

"Goodnight, Alex -- sweet dreams,"

"I have nothing but, now that most of my waking dreams have come true," Alex assured Samantha.

Within minutes the slow, steady breathing of the two women was the only sound that filled the room, aside from the faint echo of the waves far below on the deserted beach.

Continued in Part 17.

# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself and to my daughter, Nicole, for constant encouragement. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 17

### Chapter 17

Alex allowed Samantha the luxury of sleeping until she woke up on her own, knowing that this would be the last Monday in quite a while that the blonde would be able to do so. Starting tomorrow the work days would be early, and the two of them would have to be up and ready to open the doors before the employees arrived each day. Luckily, for Samantha, it was a not a business that opened its doors at eight in the morning but rather at 10. At least one of them would have to be ready and waiting by 9:30 to open the doors for the employees.

Sitting at the kitchen table she jotted down a list of who would be coming tomorrow for the orientation. The list was not an extremely long one but it seemed that both she and Sam would be needed to acquaint the newcomers with the facility. They were expecting the receptionists and the people who would be spotters in the gym area and on the climbing wall as well as the people who would be in charge of helping in the pool area. Alex had hired a nutritionist to oversee the juice bar/snack area to be sure the person behind the counter knew what they were doing. She expected a few massage therapists to show during the week to check out the facility, as well as one or two of the martial arts instructors; they were all told to telephone before they came by as normal operating hours would not be enforced until the following week. Lecturers, of course, would not arrive until their designated times for giving the classes or lectures.

The doctors in the area had all been informed of the opening of the Center and a few of them had even made it to the Open House to take a look at what the new establishment had to offer. Alex had personally given the physicians the royal tour and a few of them had their secretaries call to make sure Alex would have the needed paperwork to handle their patients. That, of course, meant adding an employee versed in Worker's Compensation forms, regulations and guidelines. Proper documentation was essential if a business wanted to be compensated by insurance companies and state agencies.

Just last week she had decided that offering biofeedback would also be a plus for the Center. She had looked in her little black book of business contacts and found the names of a few freelancers in the procedure. One in particular was more than happy to relocate to the little beach town in Southern California. Alex was looking forward to seeing Kim again. They had gotten to be quite good friends a few years back, but their friendship had been set to the side when Nikki came into the picture. Kim was another of Alex's acquaintances who had never really liked Nicole. Alex would have to once again eat crow and admit that she had been wrong about her former lover and that Kim had pegged Nikki correctly from the very beginning. When she talked to the biofeedback operator last week, Kim had told Alex she needed to tie up some loose ends in Seattle and then she would be on her way. Anticipated arrival was two weeks from today. Alex marked it in her Daytimer and made a note to add the date to her computer calendar as well. She had told Kim that she and Nikki were no longer a team but the conversation hadn't quite gotten around to include Samantha.

Adding up the regulars, she now had a list of 14 full-time employees who would split the shifts with each group working a 7-hour day. One group would start and work from 9:30-4:30 and the other would work from 4:30-10:30, with the extra time used for setting and cleaning up. They had a totally different Saturday crew and then the cleaners who were subcontracted to come in nightly.

The days would definitely be long for Alex and Samantha until they had a crew they could trust with opening and/or closing up. Because the Center would be open 12 hours a day, six days a week, they would have to have a double shift of regulars and a Saturday crew. They had already anticipated that they would not be able to be in the Center everyday to supervise and were looking to hire a manger and assistant who would be able to take over when they were not there. After all, the venture was a dream of Alex's and she certainly didn't want it to turn into an all consuming nightmare. If she had learned anything from Marge it was to delegate when the load became unbearable.

Alex was fully lost in concentration, but not so much so that she didn't hear the subtle change in the silence of the room as Samantha tiptoed out of the bedroom. She decided to let her lover get to the table area and start to reach for her before she spun around in her chair and grabbed the smaller woman.

"I almost got to you before you heard me," the small blonde squealed as she was being drawn down onto Alex's lap.

"No, you only got that far because I was waiting until you were close enough to grab," the dark-hair beauty smirked as she kissed Samantha good morning. She smiled to herself thinking that perhaps she had lost a little of her edge and had not sensed the blonde imp as soon as she should have, but there was no way in Hell she was going to admit that to the playful beauty now seated comfortably on her lap.

"Oh, Alex -- one of these days I will totally surprise you!" Samantha giggled as she threw her arms around Alex's neck and kissed her back. "What are you up to this beautiful morning?"

"I was just jotting down some things that we need to talk about before the crew arrives tomorrow."

Positioning Samantha so she wouldn't slip, Alex turned the two of them back around to face the table, then picked up the papers she had been writing on and showed them to her lover.

They sat discussing Alex's morning thoughts, sharing one cup of tea. After a few minutes Samantha shifted her position on Alex's lap and turned around to face her lover. A serious expression eclipsed the smile that had been on the younger woman's face since she had gotten up.

"You know, Alex, you made me discuss some pretty intimate stuff last night. At the time it seemed okay, but when I look back at all the descriptions that came out of my mouth . . ."

"I just wanted to know your inner most feelings, and I think you expressed them eloquently. At least I had no trouble following the directions you gave," She tickled Samantha until the smaller woman could hardly breathe. "You make me feel giddy, Samantha -- no one has ever made me feel giddy! People I've worked with for years would never believe I had the ability to joke around and play like I do with you. You have awoken parts of me that have been buried for so long it seems like a lifetime ago."

"Speaking of a life time ago . . ."

"Oh, no -- I allowed you to spend too much time with Mom . . ." Alex shook her head.

"Seriously, Alex" Samantha continued. "Your Mom says she knows this person who's great at regressions. I think that would be so much fun! Who knows, we may discover that we really are soul mates and that we have been together throughout antiquity. It would certainly explain why we were drawn to each other so quickly." She smiled sweetly, mustering all the innocence she could into a child-like smile.

"Samantha . . ."

"Oh, P-L-E-A-S-E Alex . . . Aurora said she would even pay for the sessions." Samantha fluttered her eyelashes as she lowered her head coquettishly.

"Why can I not say No to you?" The taller woman sighed and shook her head. "Okay, Samantha. As soon as we have everything here going along at a clip and able to function without us, we'll take a trip to Mom's and have her set up an appointment with her regressionist. Don't be disappointed if it doesn't work."

"I won't. I promise. But I'm sure it will." The blonde showered her lover with quick little kisses all over her face. "Thank you Alex, thank you. I can't wait!" With that she got up and walked into the kitchen. "All that begging has made me hungry. You hungry?"

"I could eat something small. I was thinking maybe we could go for a swim this morning. It will be the last weekday morning we'll have for a while all to ourselves." She looked over at the happy blonde smiling back at her from across the kitchen counter and raised an eyebrow as she gave Samantha a crooked smile.

"Sure, a swim sounds great. We haven't had time for the ocean lately. After we swim we can come back up here and have lunch." She accented the last word by opening up her robe to expose a naked body.

"We could have lunch first," Alex retorted.

"No . . . no. Small breakfast, swim and Then Lunch!" came Samantha's reply as she turned and began searching the cupboards for some peanut butter for the bagels she had just tossed into the toaster oven.

Samantha fixed the bagels and orange juice and called it breakfast. When they were finished with the small meal the two women gathered up their swimming gear and headed out to the beach area. The sand was warm and the ocean was a bit cooler than the temperature of the air. Samantha caught her breath as she slowly began walking into the blue/green water.

"It's a lot easier to get used to if you take the plunge," Alex teased as she dove headfirst into an oncoming wave. "Slowly walking into the water like you're doing is what makes you so cold." Alex tried to inform the shivering blonde.

"Yes, but . . . oh . . . okay," Samantha said as she reached out and duplicated Alex's dive into the next wave that was just beginning to break.

When she came up for air, she spotted Alex about 100 feet ahead of her beckoning her to follow. "Come on Samantha," she yelled, "I'll stay here 'til you catch up."

The two swam until they had almost exhausted themselves, riding the waves both singularly and as a joined team. Samantha got quite good at holding onto Alex as she lay on her lover's back, arms around her waist, riding the big waves into the shoreline. Alex was quite proficient at guiding the duo to their destination without drowning them. The two spent some time floating on their backs, looking up at the clouds in the azure sky. Samantha was quite good at pointing out clouds that took on the shape of imaginary creatures. On a more serious note, they contemplated

about how the coming week would unfold as it drew ever closer to the actual opening of the Center.

Alex found herself lost in thought as she pondered on how it would be meeting Samantha's parents and how difficult it was going to be to keep from displaying affection toward Samantha when they were around.

Samantha shook Alex out of her reverie by playfully splashing the tall, dark-haired beauty as she floated along in a dream state, staring up beyond where the eyes could see.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"Not worth a penny, Honey. Just relaxing, taking in the sights, sounds and odors of one of the most beautiful beaches around. This is most definitely the best way to start off a new week." She stood in breast high water and pulled her lover close. "What more could I want but to have you at my side in the middle of the ocean on a deserted beach?"

"Oh, I don't know . . ." Samantha grinned, gazing into sparkling sapphire eyes that put the sky to shame. "Perhaps having me by your side in the middle of our large water bed, completely naked and ready to fulfill your every desire."

"Now -- that might indeed top my list of desires." Alex hugged Samantha closer and kissed her passionately, the smaller woman wrapping her arms around the taller to keep from going under the water.

Alex released her hold on Sam and the two started swimming back toward the shore.

Grabbing up their towels and the scuba equipment that they hadn't gotten back out of the water to use, they raced toward the cliff and home.

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After a warm bubbling jacuzzi they began frolicking in the waterbed, thoroughly enjoying each other.

Samantha insisted on trying out a new massage on Alex. It was one she had read about in one of the massage magazines Alex had ordered for the Center. She began by warming the cinnamon flavored massage oil, which she had purchased at a speciality shop in town, in her hands. She then began trickling it slowly down the front of Alex's body. Sitting astride the tall beauty, Samantha started at the neck area and gently massaged the oil onto every inch of skin on the front of Alex's body. She cupped her hands around her lover's breasts and began to slowly lower her body onto Alex's. With a mischievous smile on her face she softly blew in the vicinity of her lover's nipples. Alex let out a small murmur of surprise. The response elicited by her lover's breath was a totally unexpected one. There was an inexplicable feeling of warmth wherever the small blonde's breath landed.

"Samantha, where did you get that oil?"

"In the little novelty shop downtown," came the reply as the smaller woman leaned more of her body on Alex's and placed her mouth totally over one of the erect nipples. "The woman who sold it to me promised that I would get a positive response from using the oil," Samantha whispered. Alex began to verbally respond but Samantha began trailing the tip of her tongue around the entire area then gently blew once again on her lover's body, looking up to watch the reaction on Alex's face. "It seems as though she was right," the small blonde smiled. Samantha traveled further down the front of Alex's body, adding more oil, blowing on and then kissing each area until she finally lowered herself to the region between her lover's thighs. She parted Alex's lower lips and applied some of the oil to the soft area within, following the procedure by softly blowing on the anointed area. Soft moans of pleasure escaped Alex's lips and Samantha smiled as she first blew on the aroused portion of her lover's body and then gently licked the flavored oil from the same.

Samantha glanced up at Alex and smiled again, "I'm not quite sure which tastes better, my love, you or the oil." She grinned and continued tantalizing the woman of her dreams. There was no need to hurry the act of love for the two had nothing planned for the entire day except to spend it with each other. Samantha pleased Alex totally as the tall dark Amazon of a woman reached orgasmic pleasure at the tongue and fingers of the woman she loved. When Alex finally drew Samantha close to her preventing the smaller woman from moving in any direction, Sam gave in and snuggled close wrapping her arm around Alex's waist and resting her head on the taller woman's breast. "I love you more than you could possibly imagine," the petite blonde whispered.

"Oh, I can imagine, my Destiny . . . I love you even more." Alex hugged Sam close and kissed her gently on the top of the head. "I bless the day and thank the Goddess every night for bringing you into my life, Samantha. Don't ever leave me, Please. I don't ever want to go back to being the person I was before I met you."

"That thought can leave you mind forever -- you're definitely stuck with me for the rest of your life . . . or as long as you'll have me. No doubt about it." Samantha answered the plea with a slight squeeze.

Exhausted from the physical exertion of first the swim and then the act of making love, the two women fell into a deep sleep awaking just as the sun was beginning to come around the side of the building and splash rays of light into the dimly lit room.

"Come on, princess, we seemed to have slept a good portion of the afternoon away," Alex stated as she gently shook her partner.

"Yes, but it was a lovely nap . . . I dreamed of the two of us walking in uncharted woods and over small hills leading into an enchanting valley. We didn't have anywhere we needed to be and the countryside was absolutely beautiful. We stopped by the edge of a huge lake and stripped to bathe. The water was warm and there was a small waterfall close enough for us to swim over and use as a shower. Alex, it was such a familiar place. We were dressed like travelers who mostly walked from place to place, boots and all. As usual you looked marvelous, even more buff than

you are now." She closed her eyes to try to bring back the scene but failed. "I hope we go there again, in my dreams -- it seemed like an interesting province."

"You can incorporate it into one of your stories," Alex told her lover, "but now we need to get up and get dressed. We're going out for dinner." She rolled over and out of the bed, turning back to offer Samantha a helping hand.

"I guess if I have to get out of bed, going to eat is the best of reasons," she grabbed the outstretched hand, leaving the bed and her dream behind for the time being.

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Over dinner they began talking on a deeper level than they had allowed time for during the past week. It was hard to believe that they had known each other for less than a month and knew so little of each other's lives before that time. Falling in love, although totally unexpected, had been as natural a reaction as breathing. Just three short weeks ago Samantha had no idea in what direction her life was going. All she had been sure of was that she wanted to write. Alex had a dream intertwined in a business she was working on. Neither had anticipated a new love affair that would enrich their lives, but both were ecstatic that the miracle had happened. Within the span of these three short weeks, two lonely strangers from different worlds had had their worlds collide and the collision had turned out to be a stroke of good fortune for each of them. Love at first sight had been a myth to Alex and a dream of Samantha's -- both found out that the "myth" indeed had a grain of truth in it, as all myths seemed to do.

Samantha began quietly talking a little more about her folks, trying to fill Alex in so there wouldn't be a lot of surprises when Friday arrived. She explained that her father was a little on the tyrannical side and that living with him after she had become an adult was impossible for her. She didn't know how her sister kept her sanity. He was chauvinist, manipulative and sometimes just plain mean but on the other hand, he was also a very good provider. Even with all his faults, he truly loved his family and they loved him. Samantha just could not live under his roof any longer.

"Daddy had really wanted at least one of us to be a boy," the small blonde confessed to her lover. "When that didn't happen I think he learned to cope with the disappointment, knowing that at least we would some day marry and he would then have "sons" in his family." Samantha tried to smile but there was a look of melancholy that was difficult to hide when she spoke of her Dad.

She continued explaining to Alex that she knew her father loved her; he just had a difficult time showing affection. He had been hard on his girls when it came to school even though he didn't think college was a necessity for young women. He was strict with his girls when it came to dating, not allowing them to date before they were 16 and making sure that he met and approved every beau. Don Riley was the kind of man who paraded his family around like prized possessions. As she remembered back, Samantha told her lover that when she was an adolescent she had begun to believe that deep down inside her Dad didn't really like women very much. He was an excellent provider and they never wanted for material things. He showered gifts upon them on holidays and birthdays, but affection was doled out sparingly.



Samantha had always been his favorite, constantly striving for her father's affection, learning early that she would have to settle for what he could give. It took all her courage to leave his house and venture off to college. He only let her continue on in school because he was sure she would attain her "MRS" degree there. It was even more difficult to inform him she wasn't coming back to live with them 'until she got married' but was going off on her own and to a different state.

Her little sister, Sally, had begged her not to leave, and she tried her best to explain to her younger sister that her life was stifled under Daddy's wing and that she didn't want to end up like their Mom - a woman with no dreams left save for the ones she bestowed upon her children.

"Oh, but Alex," she changed facial expressions, grinning broadly, "you will like my Mother. She is nothing like your Moms but she's a very loving, caring person with a good sense of humor that is hidden beneath a facade until you get her away from Daddy. It's almost like she has a split personality. When Daddy's around she's quiet and almost subservient -- something I'm sure you'll simply hate. But we grew up with her being like that and so to my sister and me, she is just being Mom. Her favorite past-times are going shopping and to the theater. I'm not really sure which she enjoys more."

"Honey, you don't have to apologize for your parents," Alex told her lover, feeling that Samantha was perhaps getting a little worried that she had been telling her too many unpleasant aspects of her parent's personalities. "I'm sure I'll like them just the way they are. Remember, I don't have to live with them, simply entertain them for a few days. Besides that, they created, birthed and raised the most wonderful woman in the universe. I will be sure to thank them for that!" She winked at Samantha and smiled broadly.

The two women finished their meal and were sitting quietly just looking . . . emerald eyes into sapphire and sapphire looking back into emerald . . . across a small candle-lit table. The mellow atmosphere of the quaint restaurant matched their moods perfectly.

Alex put her hand on the table, palm up, for Samantha to take. "You know, I can honestly say that I have never felt so comfortable with another person, aside from my parents, in my life. I know I've said it before and you'll probably become quite tired of my repeating it, but Samantha I had just about given up on the idea of love before you came into my life. Past relationships had made me extremely cynical. That I could open my heart to you and allow you to penetrate my wall in such a short period of time is as much a surprise to me as it is to everyone who knows me." She picked up the small hand lying within her own, brought it up to her lips and softly kissed it.

Samantha lowered her eyes and told Alex that she had always had mixed emotions about love before she had fallen so deeply in love with her. She had always thought that she would want personal freedom because her mother had seemed to have so little. She wanted to be loved but she also wanted to pursue a career and be able to take care of herself.

"Alex I've been waiting for years for my Prince Charming to come along on a white steed and sweep me off my feet, rescuing me from the confinements of my father's hold on me." She

ginned and stared into the deep blue eyes she adored, "Never in my wildest fantasy did I think that it would be a Princess with a castle on a cliff who would fulfil my desires." Her smile vanished as she became quite serious, "I hope I never disappoint you, Alex. I still sometimes pinch myself when I wake up in the morning and look out at the ocean. I'm afraid that someday I'll awaken to find that it has merely been a marvelous dream, a figment of my imagination . . ."

Long slender fingers reached across the table to stop the pouring forth of doubts. "No, my Destiny, you could never disappoint me. I will do my best to live up to your expectations. We don't want that dream of yours turning into a nightmare now do we?"

Alex motioned to the waitress that they were ready for the check as she poured a final glass of wine for the small woman sitting across the table from her and then refilled her own. "One more toast for the evening and then home, my love," she smiled, lifting her left eyebrow sensuously. "May we portray the perennial lovers and continue to live Happily Ever After." The two women laughed as they clinked glasses and finished off the last of the robust red liquid.

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On the way home they decided that they would end this extraordinary day with a walk on their beach in the moonlight. Upon reaching the warehouse, Samantha decided that she wanted to change into shorts. She told Alex she felt more comfortable walking along the water's edge if she didn't care about getting wet, and she knew Alex would always find a reason to end up in the water. Getting no argument from her lover, they went inside and changed. In minutes they were back out and walking toward the beach stairs. The sky was dark but the moon was unusually brilliant, especially since it was not scheduled to be full for another week. Even the stars seemed to be celebrating the night, sparkling like diamonds above the two lovers as they walked hand in hand along the shoreline.

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Cassandra sat alone in her small apartment, staring out of the picture window. She'd been drinking since coming home from work and decided to pay a little invisible visit to #1 Alternative Paradise Drive.

Her telescope had a permanent position, focused slightly west and to the south of her building complex. The blinking red light she spotted when placing her face near the eyepiece, marked the apex of Alexis Dorian's Alternative Paradise. The old warehouse had a helicopter pad on top of its roof. Being one of the tallest buildings in the area and right on the shoreline, it had become a landmark for planes going between the San Diego and John Wayne airports. It was always easy to find. She grimaced at Alex's good fortune. Cassie couldn't conceive how the woman who, in her mind, had ruined her life would be allowed to have such a perfect existence.

The auditory surveillance equipment she had placed in the elevator when she was there for the open house had been a stroke of genius. She could easily monitor the coming and going of the two women, knowing whenever they left and returned to the building, even if she didn't always know where they were headed. The where didn't really matter, after all she definitely knew when

and where she and Samantha would have their next encounter and was maliciously looking forward to the meeting.

Moments ago she had turned the volume up on the monitoring device and heard the women as they got into the elevator on their way to she knew not where. Focusing her telescope on the area surrounding the building she watched as the two lover's left the warehouse and proceeded down onto the moonlit beach. As they began frolicking in the water they had no idea that hatred was watching from afar.

Wrath continued to feed her poor spirit, and her heart hurt every time she thought about the ideal life her archenemy seemed to be living. How could it be possible that her life was in ruins while Alex's was thriving? It just wasn't fair and she was bent and determined on equaling the playing field that fate had dealt the two of them.

The only reason she had started listening tonight was because she was bored, depressed and lonely. Watching them romping on the beach did nothing to elevate the frame of mind she was already in.

She ran her hands through her already disheveled bleached blonde hair and poured herself another shooter full of Tequila. Perhaps a few more shots and she would be numb to the pain that was now engulfing her. Whoever said that revenge was sweet might have known what they were talking about, but they never mentioned the period of time while waiting for the revenge to come to fruition -- This was far from Sweet. She was miserable, more miserable than she had ever been in her life. All she did nowadays was work, come home and think about how she was going to disrupt Alexis Dorian's fairytale existence. She wanted the raven-haired beauty to feel anguish similar to that she had been enduring for far too long. Hurting Alex may not relieve her misery but at least she would have company and if 'misery loves company', she couldn't wait for the unsuspecting companion.

"I'll crash that damn ivory tower of yours, Alex. I'll bring it tumbling down around your beautiful head and laugh as your world crumbles into dust." She pushed the telescope away from her, turned off the sound monitor and staggered toward the bedroom, barely making it to her destination before collapsing on the bed in a drunken stupor.

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Samantha was the first to spot the small shiny movement in the sand directly before them. A wave had just washed up on the shore and was quickly receding back into the depths from which it had come. Something had been left behind, something that was wiggling and shimmering in the brilliant moonlight. Samantha moved closer to Alex, not sure whether to be curious or afraid of the swift movements in the sand. She let her gaze continue ahead of her and saw that there seemed to be hundreds of shiny objects twisting and turning along the shoreline, seemingly having been deposited there by the wave that was now making its way back to the sea.

"Alex, do you see the movements in front of us?" She looked up questioningly into Alex's face and was surprised at the response.

"How lucky you are Samantha, some people try all their lives to experience a night like this and never accomplish it."

"What are you talking about?"

Alex quickened her pace, almost running toward the area splattered now with constantly moving silver objects. "Come on Samantha, I think the run has just begun."

"The run of What??" came the confused reply.

"Grunion . . . Samantha this is a grunion run. You've read about them haven't you?"

"I've hear a little about them," the small blonde confessed, "but I thought they were a California myth."

"Well, now you can see for yourself that they are certainly not a myth." Alex reached back and grabbed Samantha's hand. "Come on catch one."

"How?" Samantha queried.

"Try to find an area that seems to be thick with them, be there and ready when the next wave breaks on the shore because it carries them in. Then when you see them, just go down on your knees and grab one with your hands." Alex smiled broadly at her disbelieving lover.

"With my hands! You want me to pick up fish with my hands?"

"It's the only way you can legally catch a grunion. You can be fined big time if you catch them with anything other than your hands. No nets, no buckets, just human against fish. You can put them into a bucket after you catch them but you had better be using your hands when you do."

"I don't know Alex . . ."

"Come on, Samantha -- don't be such a stick in the sand . . . this is fun!"

The sight of her statuesque lover down on her knees groveling in the sand after a squirmy little fish cracked Samantha up.

"My but you are a sight! That is a very undignified position, my love." Samantha stood over Alex laughing.

Alex reached up and caught Sam behind the knees, bringing her down into the sand. "There, now we're both looking rather undignified -- try to catch one Samantha." She looked at Sam with an expression that definitely could have been taken for a dare. "They are very hard to catch. You probably couldn't catch one anyway." With that she quickly darted over a few yards and caught two of the small fish, one in each hand. Holding them up like trophies she smiled broadly back at Samantha. "Maybe you'd better not try, I wouldn't want to show you up too badly."

Well, that did it! Samantha sat back and waited for the next wave to bring in a crooked line of the tiny fish. She lunged at two of them as they burrowed down into the sand, but she came up empty handed. She got up on her feet and raced from fish to fish as they began to retrace their paths back to the sea. She kept missing them by inches. The harder she tried, the faster they seemed to move. Alex sat down on the sand, shaking her head and laughing in near hysteria as the small blonde ran from one spot to another, coming up empty handed whenever she tried to grab one of the small fish.

"By the Goddess, I wish I had the camera with me," Alex said. "These are pictures that should be captured forever. You're absolutely priceless Samantha." She continued to laugh at the now irritated blonde.

"These slippery little fish are nearly impossible to catch. They're too fast for me!" Samantha whined as she shot Alex a "Go to Tartarus" look and began concentrating on the next wave of incoming grunions.

Alex came closer and put her arm around Sam's shoulders. "You have to be more than quick, Honey. Try to anticipate where they are going to go before they get there. If you try to catch them as they are going, you'll never do it. Get in front of them and let them wiggle toward you."

Samantha nodded and positioned herself down from the tide line, closer to the water. She waited for the next rush of water and abundance of little fishes to appear. She was not disappointed as the shoreline was again soon sparkling with the small grunions. Setting her sight on a couple of them in the sand above her she lunged full body when the little creature began to make its way back to the sea.

"I did it! I did it! I caught one," she shouted as she waved the small flash of silver in her hands. "Now what do I do with it?"

"If we had a bucket we could fill it with them, take them back up to the house and have dinner tomorrow, but it would take a bucket to make a meal. As it is just know that you've been grunion hunting and have succeeded in catching one. Maybe we can plan the next attack and have something to keep them in."

Samantha released the small creature and sent it on its way back to the ocean. "You were right there was a sense of accomplishment in the capture of that small being. But why the rules and what are they doing up on the shore?"

"You really don't know do you?" The taller woman sat down in the wet sand and pulled her lover down with her. "Look down the shoreline Samantha. Watch what happens when the wave breaks.

The runs usually occur during a high tide with a full moon; we're really lucky to see this tonight. We must have missed the scouts that were sent out first. They ride in on the waves ahead of the majority of the grunions, checking out the beach. I guess they go back and tell the others that the beach is safe. I don't think anyone knows for sure how they know if a beach is okay to populate.

They come onto the shore to mate Samantha. That's what they are doing when you see them in pairs, then they separate and go back to the ocean. If we were allowed to pick them up with utensils they wouldn't have a chance to propagate and there would be no more grunions in a very short period of time. The rules give the small fish a fighting chance and actually give them the advantage because they're very fast!"

"I picked up a fish that had just had sex! Yuck!!" Samantha responded wide-eyed, looking down the shoreline at the glimmering display. "By the Gods Alex, what if some huge creature decided to do something like that to us? Just think about it . . . how horrible!" She noticeably shivered all over at the thought.

Alex shook her head in laughter, "Samantha, I think you may be the only person in the world who's concerned about the grunions having privacy and the invasion of it by humans." She grabbed the smaller woman's hand and pulled her close. "What do you say to a nice warm bath and a glass of wine?"

"A warm bath sounds enticing and I do have to admit that watching the grunions was a unique experience. I wouldn't mind watching them again, but I don't think I want to participate in the harvesting of the little sea creatures."

The two women looked out at the shoreline bathed in a living shimmering silver as the invasion of the grunions continued totally out of harms way. Arm in arm they slowly turned toward the cliff and began walking back toward the warehouse.

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By the time they reached the house Samantha had decided against the bath and opted for a warm shower instead. It was already quite late and they were going to be getting up early in the morning to greet the new employees. Samantha had a little anxiety about being a "boss" but Alex assured her that if she treated the people the way she would want to be treated that the day would go quite smoothly. Samantha informed Alex that one of the martial arts instructors had mentioned dropping by on Wednesday and that she had also spoken to one of the massage therapists who wanted to come by Wednesday afternoon.

"I guess they're going to straggle in day by day. Maybe we should have given everyone a time to come so we don't have to be at everyone's beck and call." Alex didn't like not being in control. She was used to being the one setting the appointment times, not waiting around on other people to tell her when they were coming.

"No, Alex," Samantha countered, "I think it'll turn out just fine. We have last minute things we need to do around the house and offices anyway. We've made sure that they phone before they come so we'll be able to schedule our free time around them." Impishly glancing over at her lover she added, "I can always make time for you between the instructor and the massage therapist." She grinned broadly at Alex.

Alex turned to face Samantha, continuing the business discussion as they proceeded getting ready for bed. "Because we'll be doing some patients from doctors, I've hired a licensed physical therapy assistant to help in the clinic. My main concern will be doing the initial, interim and discharge evals. She'll be able to handle the treatments for the most part and do the daily dictating. I'll basically be around just to supervise." She walked into the bathroom to brush her teeth and added, "I figured this would be best until we see just how many clients we will be receiving from the doctors and whether we'll need a full time therapist on board." Alex had almost forgotten to tell Samantha about the PTA and figured she had better fill her in before Angel arrived on Wednesday. "Guess you can take care of the martial arts instructor while I show Angel around."

Alex came out of the bathroom to an unsmiling Samantha sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Her name's Angel?" Samantha asked. "Where did you hire her from and why didn't you tell me about her before, Alex?" The look on her face was almost one of accusation.

"Samantha," Alex started as she crossed the room to sit next to the small blonde. "I need someone to do the physical therapy treatments while I'm busy doing administrative stuff. I didn't want to hire another PT as long as I wasn't totally swamped, so I hired an assistant." She looked very confused as she continued trying to explain a situation that should have been self-explanatory. She mentally scolded herself and made a note to keep Samantha informed from now on. "I guess I should have discussed the hiring with you but honestly, Honey, it just slipped my mind."

Samantha looked up seemingly contented with the explanation, "I'm sorry, Alex. I shouldn't have reacted like that . . . after all it is your business and you know what's best . . . I'm just kinda coming in in the middle of things . . . I don't need to be informed of Every decision you make." She got up from the edge of the bed and started into the bathroom.

"Samantha," Alex began again, now totally confused at the reaction of the younger woman. "I don't understand your antagonism. I have no intention of Not informing you from now on, believe me. As far as I'm concerned, we're full partners. I didn't purposely not tell you. I guess I just went ahead and made an executive decision and then forgot about it with all the other stuff that was going on around the same time. What's really bothering you?" She got up and walked to the open bathroom door. Placing a long slender arm on either side of the frame she leaned in watching the woman she loved brush her hair.

Alex repeated her question. "What's Really bothering you, Honey?"

The small blonde turned, toothbrush still in her mouth, tears in her eyes. "I don't know." She mumbled through the toothpaste, tears forming in emerald pools as she leaned over the sink and rinsed her mouth. "As silly as it sounds, I think it's her name." She turned and looked up at the lanky beauty hanging on the bathroom door frame and smiled. "I think I had a slight twinge of jealousy." Hanging her head she walked over to the door and threw her arms around Alex's waist.

Staring up into eyes she could easily lose her soul in, she tried to explain that they had not had to deal with any one else since they've been together and the name Angel just sounded more personal than business-like to her.

Alex laughed inwardly as she picked the smaller woman up in her arms. "Those green eyes are as green as I ever want to see them, do you hear me? Angel is an employee just as all the rest of the people arriving this week are. Your first, and Only, love affair is definitely going to have it's difficult moments now isn't it? Getting used to all kinds of new emotions, are we?" She kissed Samantha passionately to convince her that there was absolutely no reason for jealousy.

Sam pulled her head back and half whispered, "Maybe I'm getting ready to start my period; mood swings are not in the least unusual at that time of the month."

"Oh, joy -- What else do I have to look forward to? -- on a monthly basis is it?" Alex laughed again and threw Samantha onto the bed then plopped down beside her. "Well, my little green-eyed monster, I think perhaps it's time we get some sleep before we have to deal with the minions in the morning."

Samantha snuggled close to her lover and wrapped her arms around her. "I love you terribly, Alex. I promise I'll try not to be jealous. I really do know better. I just can't seem to help myself. Before my mind has had a chance to really think everything out, my emotions go on a roller coaster ride to my heart and I blurt out stupid notions."

"The only 'Angel' in my life is you, Samantha. My Heaven is in your arms. Don't ever forget that." She leaned down and gently kissed her love goodnight."

"Goodnight, Alex -- sweet dreams," came the soft voice from the vicinity of her chest.

"Ditto to you, my Destiny. We've a busy day tomorrow, sleep well." With that she reached over and turned off the last of the bedroom lights, drenching the room in starlight and rays from the still brilliantly shining moon. Far below them on the beach the small silver fish known as grunions were fulfilling their own destinies.

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Morning came early and Alex's internal clock was back on track and raring to go. She glanced down at the bundle in her arms and smiled. *Today is the beginning of the venture, my Destiny. Thank you for being here and being a part of this with me. I am so very happy the Goddess brought you to me.* She kissed the soft flaxen head and gently shook the slight body, loosening arms that had remained wrapped around her throughout the entire night. Samantha stirred slightly as her eyes fluttered open.

"Good morning, boss lady, ready to tackle the troops?" Alex smiled down looking into still sleepy eyes.



"As ready as I'll ever be," the small blonde yawned as she released her hold from around Alex's waist.

The two businesswomen got up and dressed, picking up and continuing the discussion from the night before about how they were going to handle the employees as they arrived today.

After a small but adequate breakfast and with two oversized mugs filled with tea, the two women stepped into the elevator. A kiss for luck and then Alex pushed the button to lower the lift to the first floor.

The day proceeded along smoothly with all the employees turning out to be extremely personable. Alex had done an excellent job of sifting through hundreds of applications and Samantha was pleased with the caliber of the persons who appeared at the front doors at precisely 10 am. They were all standing out there when the partners reached the first floor. They had even introduced themselves to each other which Samantha took as a very good sign that they would be able to work together as a team.

The initial tour kept the entire entourage together but after that Samantha took some of the people and Alex took the rest to sit them down and explain their job descriptions on a more personal level. The entire orientation only took three hours and by two o'clock the last of the stragglers had left and all were prepared to return on Monday morning, Monday afternoon or the following Saturday to actually begin their working association with Alternative Paradise.

Samantha shut the two glass doors and began locking up. Just as she turned the last of the bolts she felt the warmth of two long, slender arms as they draped themselves around her neck. The smell of Alex's perfume permeated the air. A kiss was planted gently on the top of her head, sending chills all the way down to her toes; she knew the rest of the evening now belonged solely to the two of them. Alex's hands slowly began inching toward the opening of Samantha's blouse. Inquisitive fingers touched the smooth white skin beneath the cloth and elicited love bumps to form over Samantha's entire body. The small blonde laid her head back on Alex's chest, closing her eyes and breathing a sigh. "Gee, I thought everyone had left, are you from the day or the evening crew?"

Fingers that had just seconds ago been tender and loving emerged from her blouse to attack Sam's waist as Alex tickled the Irish imp and spun her around until they were face to face.

"I'm from the here-all-the-time crew," Alex answered as she picked up the now giggling blonde. "I have just spent nearly four hours being gracious, intelligent, understanding and friendly." She continued to carry Samantha through the gym, heading for the vicinity of the pool. "I have nothing left to give. I now have some free time before I have to start all over again being a creature of niceties . . . in the meantime . . ." Reaching the edge of the pool she held Samantha out over the water squirming and screaming to be let down.

"Let you down? Did I hear you ask to be let down?" Alex questioned.

Realizing that "let me down" was not the phrase she should be using at this point in time, Samantha tried a different approach.

"No, no. I most certainly did not say 'let me down', I think you must have heard me incorrectly, what I was saying was 'have a crown'. Yes . . . you should have a crown . . . for being such a noble employer today. A crown made of laurel . . . that's the ticket . . . a victory crown!" She raised both her eyebrows as she looked into the face of her lover who was trying to absorb the meaning of the last few sentences. Alex shook her head with a negative reaction.

"No . . . I really think you said, 'let me down' and of course I always want to do whatever it is you desire, so let your wish be my command." Finishing her sentence, she deposited the slight blonde into the deep end of the pool, completely clothed.

"Are you crazy?" Samantha gulped as she came up for air.

"Certifiably!" Came the answer from the tall, dark beauty as she took off her shoes and dove in next to her lover. "I am so tired of being polite and correct. It's time to just cut loose and relax -- she swam closer and began undressing Samantha, throwing the sopping clothing to the edge of the pool piece by piece.

"Someone might look in and see us, Alex." Samantha contested.

"No, no. No one can see into the gym, only out, remember? Or did I forget to mention about the film on the windows? Damn, maybe I did forget, but you've got to remember that all that was completed before you arrived so I can't be held accountable." She smiled at her lover as she removed her panties and threw them up out of the water. She dove under and grabbed Samantha's feet and ran her hands up the smaller woman's body stopping at strategic spots to fondle and caress. She drew the fair-skinned beauty into her arms and kissed her fervently while small hands began helping her to wiggle out of her own soaking wet clothes.

"I want to spend the rest of the day just holding you, making love to you, satisfying my appetite for you. I don't want to see another person or hear another voice other than yours."

Taking Samantha's hands in her own she twirled the smaller woman around until Sam's arms were draped over her shoulders and she swam out of the deep water into the shallow with Samantha on her back. They ended up sitting on the stairs leading out of the pool.

Samantha scooted up onto the top step and Alex positioned herself one stair below her. She began by lifting one small foot out of the water and running her long fingers up the shapely leg. She placed the caressed leg under her arm and Samantha wrapped it around her lover's back. Alex pulled her a little closer and proceeded to take the remaining leg out of the warm water and do the same, adding kisses this time. After she placed her lover's leg around her own body she put her arms around Samantha and slowly arose from the water, lifting Samantha up with her. With a fire that only love possesses she kissed her naked lover, feeling the warmth of the smaller woman's body as Samantha returned her passion.

"I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, Samantha." Alex continued walking toward the elevator, still carrying her precious package. "I can't get enough of you, I want to be so close to you that I feel like I'm a part of you."

Alex stepped into the open elevator and Samantha pushed the button closing the door and starting it on its way up to the penthouse. The short ride up was quiet as Samantha laid her head on Alex's shoulder and held her tightly.

"Now, a penny for your thoughts, Samantha," Alex queried as the lift stopped and the doors opened.

"I was just mulling over what you just said. I feel exactly the same way. It kind of goes back to the story I told you when we first met. We're like pull-aparts who have finally found each other and are trying to mold ourselves back into being a single individual." She looked lovingly at Alex and then continued, "As much as we want to be one, we need to remember that we really are two separate people. I have to give you time to be yourself and vice versa. We may not need it now, but I'm sure that for us to survive we will need to learn how to do that eventually."

"Well, aren't we philosophical today?" She smiled at the blonde as she walked across the threshold to the apartment and in return received an unsmiling mock-glare.

"I was giving you your penny's worth. You shouldn't ask if you don't want to know."

"Hey, hold onto your britches there, little Miss . . ."

"I don't have any Britches -- can't you see I'm naked?" By this time they had reached the living room. The small blonde wiggled out of her lover's arms and stood in front of the couch with her hands on her hips, doing her damndest to keep from grinning.

"Oh, I most certainly can," came the reply as Alex gently pushed her down onto the soft piece of furniture. "And, I might add, you're quite beautiful when you're naked." She placed her own body on top of Samantha's and all thoughts of meaningful conversation ceased.

"I'm going to make love to you Samantha, just the way you like it and then we're going to sit and have a glass of wine as we watch the ocean roll toward and away from the shore. When we're done doing that, I'm going to make love to you again and so it shall continue until we are both totally exhausted and want for nothing but sleep."

True to her word Alex did just that. The only change in her agenda was that between the wine and the repeat of her first vow, Samantha made love to Alex . . . just the way she liked it.

Continued in Part 18.

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# ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself and to my daughter, Nicole, for constant encouragement. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## Part 18

### Chapter 18

Wednesday arrived far too early for the two lovers who had almost managed to see the sun come up, or not as the case seemed to be. The weather outside was gloomy after such a beautiful evening. There was a gray tint to the entire room which matched the color of the morning sky.

"Wake up, sleepy head," Alex prompted, shifting her position to disengage the arm that was tightly wrapped around her. "Looks like we're gonna beat the sun up today."

Samantha shifted positions, letting loose of her conquest and turning as she continued her sleep, seemingly uninterrupted.

"Come on Samantha, we've got people to see today. You want to be ready when they arrive don't you?"

"Hmm," was the extent of her reply from the sleepy blonde.

"Samantha!" Alex tried the angry approach -- to no avail.

"Samantha. We're going to have to figure out some way to get you out of bed on time without my having to beg you every day."

"Hmmm, but you beg so nicely," the smaller woman smiled and opened one eye. "My guy's not gonna be here until noon. What time is your ANGEL coming?" she asked sarcastically.

"I'll ignore that tone, because I know you don't mean it," Alex countered. "Angel will be here at about the same time. But, it's not as early as you think. I slept late and the lack of sun is giving you a false impression of early morning. I thought we'd have a nice breakfast before they arrived." She raised an eyebrow, hoping the mention of food would be incentive enough to get the smaller woman awake.

"Breakfast -- now that is enticing. You really know how to get my attention, don't you?" Samantha sat up and grinned at the tall beauty now standing at the entrance to the bathroom.

"I thought you might respond to that," Alex grinned back at the rumpled blonde who was stretching and wiping the sleep from her eyes in an effort to wake up. "I think we'll buy one of those aromatherapy machines and look for an odor called 'breakfast strips and eggs'."

Rolling out of bed, Samantha replied, "I don't think you'll find that odor, but I'm sure it would work for a little while, at least until my stomach realized it was only being fooled." She joined her lover in the bathroom and they began to take a leisurely shower.

"You felt marvelous last night, Samantha," Alex bent her head down and whispered in Samantha's ear after she applied shampoo to the top of the blonde's head.

A sigh of satisfaction came from the smaller woman as Alex vigorously massaged the lathering soap into the golden locks. "Ditto," came the short reply. She turned around to face Alex and placed her arms around the waist of the taller woman. "You felt good making love to me and you felt good when I was making love to you. I think I have a 'win/win' situation here." She squeezed Alex tightly around the waist and nibbled on the breast that was just about mouth level.

Alex let out a short exclamation and scolded that if they were to get through with the shampooing and washing regimens that Samantha had best behave herself.

"Damn! You wake me up from a fantastic dream, escort me into the shower and then tell me I can't have fun. What a party pooper you've turned out to be." She turned her body around so her back was to Alex's front in mock displeasure. With an unseen grin on her face she proceeded to reach her arms behind her back and play with the soft tuft of hair below the taller woman's abdomen.

Alex jumped at the unexpected sensation and spun Samantha back around to face her. "You are an imp and it doesn't matter if it's the last thing at night or the first thing in the morning, you always seem to get your way with me." She quickly rinsed the soap off the shapely body standing in front of her and gently pushed Samantha down onto the corner seat in the shower stall while the water continued to flow over the two of them.

"I always have liked water games," Alex confessed. "Now that you've started my juices flowing, little lady, let's see if you can sit still here on this bench." Getting on her knees in front of the seated woman, Alex ran her long, slender fingers from Samantha's ankles up to the golden mound of hair at the top of her thighs. She parted her lover's legs and began kissing and licking inside the soft inner folds beneath the wet curly hair.

"Alex, you don't really expect me to just sit here and . . . oh . . . oh, Alex . . ." Samantha arched her back and placed her hands on her lover's shoulders.

"You will definitely learn not to start something you don't want me to finish." The water-drenched dark-haired beauty stated, looking up from her position, arching her eyebrow and smiling.

"Hmmm or maybe . . . I . . . had it all . . . planned out to . . . oh Alex . . . to end this way." She let out a nonverbal exclamation and tightened her grip on the taller woman's shoulders. "By the Gods . . ."

Content that her lover was satisfied Alex lay back on the tiled floor of the stall and allowed the water to wash over her as the small blonde slid to the floor beside her.

"Do you know what you do to me?" Samantha asked, placing her body on top of Alex's and kissing her sweetheart's wet face, as the water continued to shower down on the two of them.

"I certainly hope I have a very good idea," came the immediate reply. "You want to try it again?"

"No, Alex. You said it yourself, we need to get started before our "company" arrives." She kissed Alex tenderly and proceeded to stand up, letting the water flow down her erect body, washing away all traces of the love that had just transpired. With a mischievous grin on her face, she looked down at Alex who was still lying on the floor of the stall. "Well, I guess you don't need any breakfast!" Samantha exclaimed as she hurried from the stall, grabbing a towel on her way out of the bathroom, on her way to the kitchen.

Alex caught up with her before she reached the living room, swooped her up in her arms and carried her over to the couch. "I surely am glad you're such a smart ass," the blue-eyed siren laughed. "Picking you up and carrying you around is keeping me in shape, now that I don't seem to have the time to work out and use the weights."

"Are you calling me a dumbbell?" came the indignant response from Samantha as she landed unceremoniously on the couch. She picked up and threw a pillow in Alex's direction.

"I wouldn't think of it! Do you resemble the insinuation?"

"No, I do not!" Samantha pouted. "Besides, I've got to be more fun to lift than those stupid metal weights."

"You've got me there," came the quick reply.

"Okay, I'll make you breakfast, if you behave yourself."

"Ah, you want the old Alex to make an appearance?" Alex asked with a questioning look.

"The Gods forbid. From what I understand she wasn't a very likeable person. No, I'll take the Alex I know and love, thank you very much . . . just behave for a little while . . . until after the visitors leave." Samantha blew her mate a kiss on her way into the kitchen.

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Angel got out of her 1973 classic candy apple red Mustang and stood in front of the building she hoped would be her new place of employment. She was tired of jumping from place to place and Laguna seemed as good a spot as any to settle. She had decided after her last duty station at Balboa Hospital in San Diego that California was definitely going to be home, but San Diego turned out not to be the paradise she had hoped. Laguna would be a good place for a new start. Alternative Paradise certainly gave a marvelous first impression, even if the size of the building was a little intimidating. As she walked closer to the front doors she couldn't help but notice the array of esoteric designs in the stained glass. Some of the signs were familiar to her, but others most definitely were not. She made a mental note to check all the emblems out at a later time. High up in the right hand corner she spotted a small rainbow sticker and smiled inwardly knowing that at least this employer would be a semi-friendly one. She stood in front of the double doors, trying to decide whether to try the door handle or ring the bell. She settled for the latter, after all she knew the clinic wasn't really open yet. The establishment wouldn't be officially operational until next Monday. She straightened her clothing from the long drive and ran a quick brush through her long dark hair. Taking a huge breath, she rang the doorbell.

A deep sultry voice answered within seconds, "Yes. Can I help you?"

"My name is Angel DeNafrio, I'm here for an interview with Ms. Dorian," Angel spoke into the small box next to the door.

"Hi, Angel. I've been expecting you. I'll be right down."

She stood there waiting, trying to picture her soon to be new employer from the melodious sound of her voice. *Behave yourself Angel, this is your first face to face meeting, try to make a good impression. You need this job!*

She jumped slightly as the large double doors were opened and there stood one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. Her mouth must have dropped open because the tall ebony-haired woman standing before her raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow and glanced down at her with a slightly twisted grin. "Good morning, Angel, welcome to Alternative Paradise."

*There is was again, Angel thought, that gorgeous voice. Damn, I'd better get a hold of myself and remember I'm here on business!*

Alex ushered the new employee into the building with a sweep of her arm and began escorting Angel toward her office. "We can talk in my office first and then, if we agree to agree, I'll give you a tour of the facility."

Angel nodded an affirmative and sped up her pace to keep up with the taller woman's stride.

"It's very unusual of me to hire a new employee without a personal interview, but your qualifications, according to your application, are just the ones I was looking for in a PTA." Alex offered Angel a chair and then went around and sat down in her own behind the desk. She picked up the application that she had lying in front of her. "Angel -- you don't mind if I call you Angel, do you?"

The smaller woman nodded that she didn't and Alex continued.

"I have to say that the specifics that caught my eye on your application were that you got your training in the Navy and ended up working at a couple independent duty stations." Her piercing blue eyes looked up directly into the dark brown eyes of the prospective new employee. "I need someone who can work on their own without my having to be in the immediate vicinity. Someone who can take initiative" Again she looked over at the younger woman to take in her response. The woman seemed undaunted with the fact that she would not be strictly supervised. The response was a good one, she just sat there waiting for Alex to continue. If she had smiled too broadly, Alex would have anticipated ego problems and had she winced at the thought of working on her own, Alex would have had to bring their association to a speedy end.

Feeling that the tall woman was waiting for a response, Angel volunteered, "Yes, I went into the Navy right out of high school. There was a really cu . . . um . . . good recruiter at our school and I had been lured by the idea of getting my education paid for."

"Why did you decide on being an assistant instead of continuing on and becoming a therapist?"

"At the time I just wanted to get out of the house and the feeling was mutual as far as my stepfather was concerned. We hadn't been getting along for a few years. I was promised physical therapy training by the recruiter if I passed all the tests and she told me they only had the accreditation for PTAs, not for therapists so . . ."

"Okay, I can understand that," Alex replied, curious about the environment that would prompt a young girl to opt for a lesser degree, but seeing that she would have to wait for further information. Angel was obviously just going to give enough of the facts to get herself through the interview and into the position. She had to give her credit for that.

Alex continued. "The other entries that caught my attention were that you've been working in physical therapy clinics or chiropractic clinics since you left the service. That's a definite plus when working in a Center such as this one. People sometimes have trouble orientating to a clinic environment after doing a lot of hospital or convalescent work. The only troubling factor was the length of time you put down as spending at each of these clinics. I didn't want to jump to conclusions and I didn't think that discussing the topic over the telephone was appropriate so . . ."



Alex tried to be gentle with the question; she didn't want to sound as though she was interrogating the younger woman, but she did need an answer to base her judgement as to whether or not Angel would be an asset to Alternative Paradise. "Would you please explain to me why the length of employment at each of these clinics was less than a year?" She sat back in her chair awaiting the response.

Angel began to look a bit uncomfortable as she shifted in her seat. Alex could sense the uneasiness, but needed to have the question answered so sat patiently waiting. Angel began to speak, seemingly totally off the subject, "Ah . . ." she cleared her throat, "I noticed that you have a rainbow sticker in the corner of the front door . . ."

The smile faded from Alex's face and her soft blue eyes began turning to ice. She'd have no bigots working for her that's for sure. "Do you have a problem with that?" She asked, her voice a little harsher than she had intended.

"No, not at all, quite the contrary!" came the quick response. "After getting out of the Navy, I went to work for a chiropractor and he kept making passes at me. I didn't want to file sexual harassment charges so I quit." Seeing no change in Alex's face, the younger woman quickly continued, "The next clinic I worked for was a PT clinic and I was fairly happy there until one of the clients started spreading rumors that I was a lesbian and the owners were homophobic so . . ."

She glanced over at Alex but still could not read her stone faced expression. She decided that since Alex hadn't interrupted, it was best to finish. "The last clinic that's listed on the application was also for a chiropractor and I had the same problem as the first. I finally came out and told him that I was a lesbian." (There she had gotten it out in the open and if this place really was Gay friendly then that should be no problem.) He fired me immediately and told me that if I didn't try to file charges, he would allow me to receive unemployment and would give me a good reference but he didn't want a deviate working in his clinic. He said he was sure there were plenty of places in California who would gladly hire an open homosexual but that his clinic was not one of them." She breathed a heavy sigh and glanced back up at Alex's face which had definitely taken on a softer posture. In fact she thought she saw the beginnings of the beautiful smile reappearing.

"If those are the only detriments on your record, then I believe we will get along just fine. Since we talked about salary over the phone I guess that just about concludes the interview. This is a "Family" friendly organization, Angel, and since we are bearing souls, it is also a "Family" owned establishment. Alex's smile became quite wide and genuine as she stood up and walked over to the new employee. She held out her hand, "Welcome to the Family, Angel. We expect a lot from our people but you will find that we are more than fair in all our dealings."

Angel breathed a sigh of relief as she took the older woman's hand. "Happy to be on board, Ms. Dorian."

"You can call me Alex, we're pretty informal here. We're still a small center." Alex smiled at the newest member of her crew.

"Do you know how to dictate progress notes?" Angel's new employer inquired.

"I've done a little, but each clinic is different . . ." she began.

"That's okay, I'll have my partner fill you in on how the machines operate, she's the expert in that area. I'll go over all the forms with you on Monday morning and the process of documentation. I don't know how many actual 'patients' we'll be having in the beginning. I do hope you will be able to be flexible in your scheduling. I may need you occasionally on a Saturday and your hours may vary from day to day for a while until we get settled in. Do you think you can deal with that?"

"Yes, I won't have much of a social life at first anyway, moving into a new area. I can spend the extra time down on the beach and just exploring." Angel answered.

"Good, so you'll be moving up here to Laguna? I think you'll find that a wise decision. It's an awfully long commute down to San Diego every evening." Alex commented.

Angel began to explain her living arrangements to Alex, "Oh, I definitely plan on moving up here. I just wanted to solidify the employment before actually looking for an apartment or house. Where I'm living now, I share and we've already talked about my leaving so there's no problem there, it's just finding a place here."

Alex escorted her out of the office and into the gym area. She had promised a tour of the facility and the time had come to fulfil the obligation. They began with the first floor, all the while Alex explaining some of Angel's duties to her. Angel walked along in silence most of the time focusing on Alex's voice, the way she carried herself and her sense of accomplishment that seemed to ooze from her like a beacon. The younger woman became more enamored with Alex the more she spoke. Angel found the tall, dark-haired beauty's voice mesmerizing and was looking forward to having the opportunity to work with her. She had never had a female, let alone a lesbian, boss and found the prospect of it exciting. She anticipated that work might actually be a pleasure instead of a constant chore. Angel wondered, as they passed the climbing gym and juice bar areas, if Alex was attached or single and hoped for the latter. She knew Alex had spoken of a partner, but that could be just a business partner.

They took the elevator up to the second floor and the training areas. There were two people standing on the large mat in the middle of the area, talking. Alex ushered Angel over for introductions.

"Angel, this is my partner, Samantha Riley and this is one of our Tae Kwon Do instructors, Bryan Edwards." Alex looked at the two on the mat and then back to her new protégée. "This is our new employee, Angel DeNafrio."

Bryan immediately extended his hand for shaking, thinking himself a lucky guy to be working around so many beautiful women. What contrasts there were standing in front of him. His boss was a beautiful statuesque woman, close to six feet in height he guessed, with fair skin, short, raven-colored hair and eyes that would make the azure sky jealous. Samantha was of average

height, perhaps a little on the short side by today's standards, very cute, with hair as fair as Alex's was dark and eyes the color of emeralds. And now standing before him was a third beauty. This little 'Angel' was close to Samantha in height but the exact opposite in coloring. They looked like Snow White and Rose Red standing next to each other. Angel had lovely olive-colored skin, long ebony hair and eyes to match.

Bryan had just moved to Laguna and it was looking more and more like a good place to settle and eventually build his own following. At this point though, he merely hoped to have enough clients to make his classes worthwhile.

The women were busy talking amongst themselves as Bryan took notice that none of them wore a wedding band. Looked like a bachelor's paradise from where he stood. Little did he know that not one of the beauties surrounding him would ever have any more interest in him other than learning or sparring with him in Tae Kwon Do.

Angel told Alex that she would have to leave shortly so she could get a local paper and begin looking for an apartment or small house. Then she needed to get started back down to San Diego. She hoped to miss the rush hour traffic, but was afraid she would find herself right in the middle of it if she didn't leave soon. She mentioned that she would be up again before the end of the week to do some serious dwelling hunting, as finding a place by the weekend was her goal.

Bryan asked Angel if she had any idea where she wanted to live in the area and they began conversing among themselves.

Samantha tugged on Alex's arm, and pulled her to the side a few paces away from Angel and Bryan.

"Alex, I suppose we could offer that she stay with us a few days while she was looking for an apartment, that way she wouldn't have to keep bouncing back and forth between here and San Diego. The only problem is that my parents are coming in on Friday afternoon."

"Actually, there's plenty of room. Your parents and sister can all put up in the suite and Angel could stay in the bedroom the guys used when they were here." Alex smiled wickedly.

"Ah, ha. I get where you're going . . . if Angel is staying in "My Room", and my folks and sister are in the suite, then I would be forced to share your living quarters for the weekend." She grinned broadly at her lover, "What an excellent idea. Even Dad would find no fault in giving up a bedroom for a visitor."

"I'll walk Angel back down and give her the invitation and the details of how your parents are not to know about our permanent arrangement." She winked at Samantha and the two turned back to join Bryan and Angel.

Angel said her goodbyes to Bryan and Sam and she and Alex proceeded down the elevator toward her car, Alex filling her in on the conversation she and Samantha had just finished.

"So, Samantha," Bryan started when the two dark-haired beauties were out of sight. "Would you like your first lesson now? I have a little time before I need to get going."

"That sounds great," the small blonde acknowledged. "Let me quickly go change into the dobok Alex bought for me. She ran from the room, heading for the elevator."

Within minutes she was back dressed in her new white uniform and sporting a white belt. "Alex said I could use this until I start getting belts of my own," she explained to Bryan. "So . . . I'm ready when you are." Samantha walked over to the mat and stood solemnly awaiting instructions from the instructor.

"You have quite a friend in Alex," the teacher remarked. "Buying you your first dobok and allowing you to wear one of her belts. I'm sure you'll be a fast study and your belts will come quickly." He smiled and moved closer to Samantha.

"The best place to start is with your posture and stance."

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Alex walked Angel out to her car, filling her in on what she and Samantha had discussed. By the time they reached the car, Angel was well aware that Alex was definitely not available for dating and some of the joy went out of her landing the job. But, there was always a chance, as far as she was concerned. One never knew how long these new love affairs would last, after all hers usually lasted about nine months before either she got restless or her partner did. Thinking back, the longest relationship she managed to keep going was 18 months. Of course most of the time in the Navy was a time of experimentation and growing. After she got out she never stayed in one place long enough to keep someone interested or for her to remain monogamous, at least those were the excuses she gave herself. If she stuck around learning all she could about Alex, she still might have a chance with the gorgeous woman walking next to her. She nodded politely as Alex continued to explain the "rules" for staying at the warehouse with Samantha's family coming to visit this weekend.

"I think I might just take you up on your offer. It would be a great relief to be able to find a place before Monday, but being able to stay here with you if I can't will keep me from having to commute between here and San Diego. Thanks a lot, Alex, I really appreciate it. Not many people would invite a total stranger into their home." She looked up at the tall woman and wished she had met her before Samantha ever came into the picture.

"You may be a stranger, but you're also an employee now and you're "family." We need to stick together and help each other whenever we have the opportunity. You're quite welcome for the invitation, but in actuality, it was Samantha's idea. She's the one with the soft heart."

As they reached the Mustang, Angel saw the look of admiration in Alex's eyes. "She's a real beauty isn't she? When I purchased this little baby she was in really poor condition but I had a dream of fixing her up to purr like a kitten and look like a fox." Angel patted the car on the hood.

"It's a beautiful car, Angel. I always liked the style of the Mustang; it's an early '70's right? Maybe '72, '73?"

"'73," Angel chimed in proudly, "She's a classic."

"Yeah," Alex continued, "They always seemed to have a lot of character. She's really sweet. But that color can get you into a lot of trouble if you have a heavy foot on the accelerator," Alex grinned.

Angel had opened the door for her to look inside and Alex placed her hand on the soft leather interior. "Very nice."

"Want to go for a ride?" Angel offered.

"Not today, I've got to get back inside, but thanks for the offer."

Angel got in and Alex closed the door for her. "Well, guess I'd best get started back, I'll pick up a paper on my way out of town and will most likely be back on Friday. I'm pretty packed up already and don't have much to move, anyway. I'm not much of a homebody yet. One U-Haul should do the trick. Do you know if there's a public storage around here somewhere?"

"Yes, there's one on the way out of town, not too far from here and just off Coast Highway. You'll see their sign on the way south."

"Good. Then I'll go talk to them now and set it all up. I'll call before I come over." Angel reached out her hand to shake Alex's. "Thanks for the job and thanks for the place to stay. See ya Friday, Alex."

"Okay, sounds good. You're welcome, again, for the place to stay. You'll earn your job, believe me. Drive carefully and we'll be looking for you sometime on Friday. Remember Samantha's folks and her sister will be coming in on Friday, also, so we won't have a lot of time for visiting. It would be best if you could get here before noon so we can get you settled in before having to deal with family affairs."

"No problem, I'll make it my priority to be here before noon."

"Fine, we'll see you then. Bye Angel."

"Bye," came the response from the small, dark-haired woman as she pulled away from the curb and started on her trip south.

Alex watched her go with a wave of her hand and turned to go back to the clinic. She knew it was really uncalled for but her sense of danger seemed to be working overtime as she spun around in all directions. She could have sworn that someone was watching her but there was no one in eyesight. Shaking it off, she continued back to the building.

Inside the warehouse she headed straight for the training area. As far as she was concerned it was time for Bryan to go home so she could have a quiet evening alone with Samantha. She wondered if she would ever lose the feeling of wanting to have her lover alone to herself. Deep down inside she hoped the desire never lessened. Even though it was a bit selfish of her, it gave her a sense of warmth and home.

For years she had looked forward to opening this Center and having the privilege of working it and watching it grow. Now all she wanted to do was to get the business to a level where she could be a silent owner and then she and Samantha could spend the rest of their days enjoying each other and doing anything they desired. She wanted to show Samantha the world and she hoped Alternative Paradise would be her vehicle. Sure, she had her inheritance from her grandparents and was financially set but Kelley had instilled in her the work ethic of finishing a job begun and she wanted to make Kelley proud. They would, soon enough, have all the time in the world, for now they would have to be content with small trips while the business matured.

She turned the corner, facing the training mat and facing a scene that quickly elevated her blood pressure. Samantha was standing in the middle of the mat in her new dobok, looking absolutely adorable. Then there was Bryan. He was standing close behind Samantha positioning her arms. As she stood there watching, unnoticed. He placed his left hand on Samantha's waist and reached his right hand around to the front of her body and down the inner side of her thigh, moving the thigh in an outward position.

Alex's immediate thoughts were definitely not pleasant ones. *He's way too close. There's absolutely no reason for him to be holding her like that. I'm gonna beat the shit out of him!*

Feeling herself ready to explode but doing her damndest to keep her temper under control she started over to the mat. Samantha was the first to catch a glimpse of Alex's image in the windows in front of her. She smiled broadly and turned her head, not at all prepared for the look on her lover's face. The hostility was overwhelming and Samantha lost her smile as well as her balance. She began to fall and her surprised trainer turned around, wondering what had caused Samantha to move so awkwardly. He made immediate eye contact with a rather menacing looking Alex.

"I didn't realize Tae Kwon Do was such a contact sport, Bryan," Alex began her accusation. And it definitely was an accusation.

The trainer realized that he had perhaps overstepped his boundaries when positioning Samantha. The smaller woman was a novice to the art and did whatever he said. Alex, on the other hand was not and probably realized that he could have gotten Sam into the same position simply by telling her what to do or by standing in front of her and moving her arms or legs. He had to admit that holding her felt a lot better but he was now thinking that perhaps he had just screwed this job up royally. The only thing he could not understand was why Alex seemed to be taking it so personally. Must be one of those feminist things that men just don't understand he told himself. He tried smiling at Alex, but could see that it wasn't going to get the response he was looking for.

"I was just trying to get her into the correct *Ki Cho Elbo* (basic form). She has the *Choonbi* position down and I thought . . ."

"Oh, is That what you were doing," Alex countered as she walked over closer to the mat. "Why don't I go change and then the two of us can go it one step better and give Samantha a little demonstration of the entire art? Are you up for that, *Bryan*?"

Not sure what his employer was thinking but seeing that she looked anything but happy, Bryan thought it best not to antagonize the stern woman any further. "Sure, sounds good to me," he answered, glancing over at Samantha for any hint of what was happening.

"Fine," came the indignant response. "I'll be right back down."

Alex turned and headed back toward the elevator. Samantha started to follow but Bryan grabbed her sleeve and pulled her back. "What's Her problem?"

"I'm not really sure, but I hope you're an exceedingly good instructor. I do know that Alex has a lot of belts, including more than one black." Bryan thought he saw pity in her eyes as she tried to describe Alex's level of expertise.

"Without trying to sound conceited, Samantha, I have to admit I'm pretty good at what I do. I've been trained in a variety of martial arts, not just Tae Kwon Do. If she wants to do some *gyoroogi* which means sparring, then I'm her man." He put on an air of confidence that he really didn't feel and smiled at the pleasant blonde.

They waited in silence for Alex to reappear, each staring out at the ocean lost in his and her own private thoughts.

Samantha couldn't understand what had gotten Alex so angry. She was positive it was anger she had spied in her lover's beautiful face.

Their reverie was broken as Alex announced her arrival with a *ki-hop* (yell of power). She sauntered into the room dressed in her dobok, black belt tied around her waist and looking intimidating. Without cracking a smile she walked over to the mat and bowed. "Ready for a go round *Sah bom nim* (head instructor) she queried Bryan.

"Most definitely," came the response as he returned her *kyong-ye* (bow). The competition began.

Samantha backed off toward the windows to sit on one of the benches and watch as her lover and her instructor began their private challenge.

They merely danced around each other for a few minutes and then Bryan did a kick which totally missed its mark. Alex threw a punch, barely missing his jaw. They danced some more, sizing each other up and then Bryan started with a combination movement that ended up with a round kick which almost threw Alex off balance. She countered with a high jump kick to his face, hitting her mark and sending him spinning backward. He looked confused at first and surprised that she actually got a kick in, then his facial expression went to concentration as he recovered and the dance began again.

A half-hour passed as they spared with each other, taking turns throwing and blocking punches and kicks. Occasionally one of Bryan's kicks or punches would find its mark but Alex would always recover and come back at him even harder. The same went for Alex's movements when they collided with Bryan's body.

After what seemed like an eternity to Samantha, who winced every time Bryan's foot or fist made contact with her lover's body, Alex let out another power yell and in the middle of a high jump kicked Bryan in the chest knocking him off his feet and onto the mat. He got up and started toward her when she yelled again and kicked him in the groin. He went down hard holding his injured area and rolling into a ball.

"That was an illegal kick," he moaned through clenched teeth.

She was about to render a kick in the direction of his face when Samantha yelled out for her to stop -- that the exhibition was over.

With total insincerity, Alex looked down at the fallen instructor, "Oh, I'm sorry. I was aiming higher, are you sure you weren't beginning a jump?"

"You know damn right well, I wasn't!" came the angry reply. "What the Hell's the matter with you? If you have a beef with me, just spit it out."

"Okay, Casanova ~~ I don't like the way you teach," Alex spit the words at him. "Contact like I was privy to when I first entered this room is not professional and if I find you looking that intimate with any of the students who come here for lessons, I will personally have your license revoked. You got that?" If Alex had been capable of it, her words would have been spewed forth accompanied by fire.

"Samantha is not taking her lessons in a class setting . . ." he started to explain, getting an uneasy feeling as to where the entire conversation was leading.

"I mean that *especially* with Samantha! You had best be on your most professional of behaviors when dealing with her." She glared at the injured man, her eyes as cold as icicles. "She's my lover . . . and you're lucky I didn't just come in and beat the shit out of you before asking any questions."

"Your . . . Damn! Alex . . . why didn't you tell me before? I didn't know you were lesbians." Even in his aching state he cursed the fact that the two beauties in the room with him were totally out of his league.

Steel blue eyes glared in his direction, "Didn't think it was really any of your business, but now that you know, do you have a problem with that, Bryan?"

Samantha started to intervene, but Alex glowered in her direction and she thought better of it and sat quietly back down. She wasn't sure she liked the side to Alex she was seeing right now, it was dark and uncaring and it scared her.



Bryan thought it best to answer the question she posed as quickly as possible, "No . . . I don't have a problem with that . . . none at all . . . I just wish I had known."

Alex's voice remained chilled with a hint of sarcasm, "I guess I didn't realize I was hiring the Valentino of martial arts. We can go two ways from this point. One: You continue working here, holding classes and teaching Samantha without trying to "make" her. Two: You go your own way and I'll find myself another instructor." She scowled at the crumpled figure sitting on the mat, not a trace of regret in her demeanor. "Well?"

Bryan looked at Samantha who again wore the look one gives a wounded puppy at the pound. He had no intention of leaving this job that might catapult him into his dream of owning his own Dojang. Swallowing what little pride Alex had left him, he got to his feet and respectfully bowed in her direction. "I'm sorry if I offended either you or Samantha, I really didn't mean to. I would like to continue here, I think Alternative Paradise will help me to accomplish my dream and I think I will be good for your Center."

Alex's facial features began to slowly soften as she listened to what the man had to say. There was no tone of untruth or prejudice in his voice. She looked over at Samantha who nodded her approval to keep him on at the Center. Slowly she walked over to Bryan and held out her hand. "You're pretty good at what you do. Color within the lines here and we'll get along just fine."

He eagerly took her hand, feeling her strength and confidence in the pressure of the handshake. Alexis Dorian was definitely a woman not to be crossed; he wanted to stay on her good side for the remainder of their working relationship.

The martial arts instructor thanked Samantha for the tour of the building not failing to add, as he looked in Alex's direction, that the establishment was quite impressive and that he was sure their mutual alliance would be profitable for all involved. Bryan looked over at Samantha and said goodbye, promising her another lesson at her convenience while glancing over at Alex with a contrite look on his face.

"I'll just show myself out," he stated, walking toward the front of the building. "See ya on Monday." He gave a slight wave and was out of sight.

Samantha turned to her lover, "Come on, let's get you upstairs and cleaned up," the small blonde insisted as she pushed Alex toward the elevator. You know he could have hurt you."

"Don't be ridiculous, I was just toying with him until I got bored," came the reply.

"But Alex, you downed him with an illegal kick . . ."

For the first time since the incident, Alex showed a small amount of contrition, "I guess that wasn't "fair", but Samantha, he . . ."

"It doesn't really matter what He was doing, Alex. Did you ever stop to think of what I was doing? I was having a private lesson. I wouldn't have let the situation get out of hand. You really

need to learn to trust me!" Samantha eyes met her lover's and the beautiful soft blue orbs immediately melted her anger. She threw her arms around the woman in front of her. "I love you and am not going to be swayed by someone putting his hand on my leg. I didn't realize what he was doing was inappropriate or I would have stopped him immediately. If he had gone any further I would have. Trust me Alex." She looked back up into those eyes, her own eyes pleading. "I wouldn't want to see you hurt or see you hurt someone else over something so easily controlled."

"I'm sorry, Samantha. I'll try not to lose my temper so easily again. But, honestly, I thought I was being constructive with it initially -- I could have just decked him when I walked into the gym instead of giving him a fighting chance." The twinkle was back in those baby blues as she bent down and gently kissed the woman of her dreams. "Let's go upstairs and make-up, shall we?"

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They attempted to put the happenings of the past hour behind them as they shed their uniforms and Samantha prepared a fragrant bubble bath. She gently lathered her lover's body, noticing a few bruises on her face and some tender areas on her torso. "Guess these squelch any bed gymnastics this evening," she grinned after Alex grimaced when she touched a particularly sore spot.

"It would take more than a few bumps and bruises to keep these hands off that body of yours, little one," Alex replied trailing her long fingers over now familiar breasts. "I'd have to be in pretty critical condition not to want to make love to you." She pulled the smaller woman closer and lifted her onto her lap.

The passion which followed was intense as Alex kept flashing back to the picture of Bryan with his arm around her lover. Each time the vision appeared in her mind's eye, her grip on Samantha became stronger, as if she could bind her hold on her treasure by simply willing it. She realized that she needed to keep her jealousy in tow. The look on Samantha's face when she saw that Alex was about to kick Bryan, even though he was already down, was a look she never wanted aimed in her direction again.

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Thursday was rather uneventful with a couple of the massage therapists calling to come look at the facility. Other than that they basically just kicked around the apartment.

Alex went down and worked on some business files she had been neglecting and got in touch with a few clients who had been e-mailing her.

Samantha unpacked a few more boxes. Then she made sure the guest room was ready for Angel's arrival and dusted the suite for the last time before her parents would arrive on Friday.

They had an early dinner at home and decided to watch some television. Apprehension of the familial visit was beginning to weigh on Samantha and Alex was not sure how to handle the

situation. She had always been eager or if not eager at least happy when her Moms decided to visit, it was always a fun time. She believed that Samantha, on the other hand, would really have preferred that her family not come. She hoped that Samantha was not ashamed of their love for each other, she didn't think that was the case, but there was still that nagging doubt. Not being sure how to breach the situation she decided to simply ignore it and gave Samantha a little space for reflection and quiet time.

Alex stretched out on the sofa with her head on Samantha's lap and within 15 minutes of the start of the Movie of the Week was fast asleep. Samantha found herself to be just as disinterested in the story on TV but she wasn't tired. Carefully lifting Alex's head she placed a small pillow under it and left her lover sleeping peacefully.

She picked up one of her writing logs, grabbed a couple of the large pillows and went to sit quietly in front of the windows. Lost in inspiration, time quickly slipped from early evening to late as she wrote about her trepidation of the coming meeting between her family and Alex. Never before had she been so afraid to tell her family something, yet never before had anything in her life been as important as the beautiful woman slumbering innocently behind her on the couch.

She glanced up from her writing to view her dark angel in the windows before her. Her eyes misted over at the love that caused her heart to race and then to ache when she thought about what she might end up putting her lover through if they didn't carry this weekend out to their expectations.

What she wanted most was for her family to love Alex as much as she did but she knew that her father would never accept Alex on a truthful basis. As a friend he would welcome her but as a lover Samantha was afraid of what he might do.

Turmoil always seemed to produce some of her best writing and she was certain that tonight was no exception. She opened her mind and let her Muse guide her, scribbling notes and then finally a completed entry in her book. By the time she was finished writing, she was mentally exhausted. Rather than awaken the beauty on the couch she decided to curl up with the pillows and sleep with the ocean in front of her and her love within sight behind her. She felt safe and secure here in the ivory tower of her lover's design. With most of her doubts now down on paper and the sight of Alex superimposed on the window, she allowed herself to slip into the world of dreams.

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Alex was startled awake by the hum of the "white noise" on television. She rubbed her eyes to clear them of sleep and get her bearings. Looking around the room she spotted Samantha curled up on the floor by the windows, hugging one of the large throw pillows, her writing book open on the floor beside her. Alex smiled inwardly at the sight of her sleeping bard who lay exhausted after an evening of creativity.

The lure of the open book was more than she could endure. Surely Samantha wouldn't mind if she read her newest entry, what's a writer without an audience? On the open page in Samantha's small clear printing was a new poem:

### Land of Dreams

I dreamt of flying above the clouds, beyond where the eyes dare go  
To a land where the waters were crisp and clear and the air clean as fallen snow.  
'Twas a place where love was held most dear, with no societal bans  
And lovers of Every Persuasion walked, joyfully holding hands  
There were creatures of legend, both old and new ~~  
One could watch them romp and roam  
And there, my love, were You and I, in a place that we called Home.  
With dreams fulfilled and our love avowed, we lived in this World so rare  
'Tis such a shame that it's only through dreams that we may venture there!

With unprecedented pride she looked lovingly over at her sleeping beauty and whispered, "You certainly have the gift of Sappho, Samantha." Alex closed the book and placed it on the coffee table then picked up the pen that had also fallen to the floor and put it next to the book. She bent down to pick up the sleeper. As she placed an arm under Samantha's legs and another around her back, the smaller woman instinctively put her arms around Alex's neck. Her eyes fluttered partially open, "Oh, Alex, I was having the most wonderful of dreams." She placed her head back down on her lover's shoulder. "You were carrying me, just like you are now. I think we've done all this before. I loved you then, Alex, as I love you now." A small sigh escaped her lips as she trailed off back to sleep while her *hero* carried her off to bed.

Continued in Part 19.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to

the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself and to my daughter, Nicole, for constant encouragement. Thanks to you for reading it.

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## **Part 19**

### **Chapter 19**

No doubt about it, today was going to be one busy day; even Samantha was up and awake not long after the sun began to shed a little light on the cliff-side warehouse.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," the small blonde confessed to her lover as they started the morning ritual of bathing and dressing. "You'd think the people coming to visit were strangers to me!" She looked over at Alex. "You should be the one with butterflies in your stomach, not me."

"Just to set the record right -- I Do have butterflies in my stomach," the tall dark-haired woman replied with a small grin.

"You certainly don't act like you do!" came the quick reply.

"Because I don't act in a certain way does not mean that I don't have trepidations about meeting your family. Actually the only one I'm really looking forward to meeting is your sister."

Samantha winced and Alex peppered her last statement with, ". . . and your mom."

A smile reappeared on the small blonde's face just as the phone began ringing. "The only reason that would be my parents is if they had decided not to come and I very much doubt that." She picked the receiver up on the third ring, just before the answering service would have taken over.

"Hello."

"Hi, Samantha?"

"Yes, this is Samantha, who's this?"

"Angel DeNafrio, could I speak with Alex, please."

Samantha frowned slightly and placed the phone on her body to muffle her voice. "It's your Angel," she mimicked, rolling her eyes and rocking her head side-to-side, her tone more than

slightly sarcastic. "Seems like she needs to talk to the boss lady, instead of second in charge." She handed the phone over to Alex.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that your face would freeze when you make ugly faces?" Alex whispered into the blonde's ear as she took the receiver from her. "Hi, Angel. What's up?"

"Nothing much, I just wanted to tell you that I'll be leaving here in a few minutes, so I should get there around 10. Is that convenient for you?"

"Ten's good for us. Samantha's parents should be here around two. That should give us plenty of time to show you around upstairs and get you settled in. There won't be much time after that, I'm afraid. Samantha has the evening all planned out." She smiled over at her lover who was definitely listening to the conversation.

"Sounds good on my end." There was a small pause. "Well, Alex, guess I'll see ya in a couple hours. Bye." Angel smiled as she replaced the receiver on the cradle. She was looking forward to seeing her new boss again. She had told her friends all about Alex and her business with a penthouse overlooking the ocean. They were definitely envious of her new position and wished her the best of luck. A farewell dinner had kept her out late last night and even with a hum-dinger of a hangover, she was up bright and early. This was one trip she was anxious to get started on.

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Alex had ended the conversation and handed the phone back to Samantha.

"So tell me, why did she have to talk to you? What did she do just give her time of arrival? Why couldn't she have told me?" Samantha queried.

"I don't know Samantha. Don't start with that stupidity again. She probably just feels more comfortable talking to me," Alex frowned.

"I'll Bet!" came the reply as Samantha almost slammed the phone back onto its cradle.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, having her stay here while she house hunts." Alex walked over to Samantha and put her arms around her shoulders. "Would you rather I put her up in a motel room for a few days?" Up went the eyebrow as she stared down at her lover.

"No, I'm being silly. It's just that I have this gut feeling that she would rather be your friend than mine, maybe even more than your friend, if you know what I mean." There was a trace of worry in the soft green eyes that stared back up at Alex.

"Well, even it that is true . . . once she really gets to know me . . . the working me, I'm sure that opinion will change. I'll be her friend away from the center, but when she's working we will have a completely different relationship and she may find that the two don't mix well."

"What like you're my lover, but you're also my boss?"

"Samantha, how many times do we have to go over this? You don't really consider me your boss do you? I want us to be partners in this. I have more experience in this type of work and will give my opinions on how I feel things should be run, but I promise to always listen to your suggestions. Right now a lot of this is new to you and I realize there will be a learning period. But, there will come a time when we will both know the business equally well." Samantha gave her an incredulous look. "Come on, Honey, this is just the beginning. I've been used to working pretty much on my own for a long time now and it may take me some time to get used to relying on someone else. But having you to confide in will also take some of the load off my shoulders." She leaned over and whispered. "Besides it never does any harm to be on good terms with the boss lady."

Samantha punched her in the arm which elicited a large guffaw -- not at all the response she was expecting, but she decided to smile back at her lover and drop the conversation at least for now.

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The remainder of the morning went smoothly and fast. Before they realized it Angel had arrived. Alex helped her with her luggage up to the guest room. They had a spare key for the elevator made for her and Alex explained how it was used. She also handed her a key to the front door, but informed the younger woman that they would need the keys back when she left and that she had to keep them informed on her coming and going as long as she stayed because of the security system.

Angel said she understood perfectly about the security of the building and thanked Alex again for letting her stay while she was house hunting. Alex made sure she again gave Samantha the credit for the offer.

After they had her fairly settled Alex asked, "Did you find any ads in the local paper for an apartment or house?"

"Yes, actually there are a few apartments for rent in my price range, a couple of small houses and a large studio overlooking the ocean." Grinning broadly she continued, "I think I'll start with the studio. It sounds almost too good to be true. The price is right, it's overlooking the ocean and the owner said it's quite large.

"That sounds interesting, Angel. Let's just leave your stuff here and go join Samantha," Alex suggested, as she knew lunch would probably be ready by now.

Samantha had made the offer to make lunch while Alex was helping Angel get acquainted with her room and bathing facilities. Angel was still explaining to Alex about the studio she hoped to rent when they reached the door leading to the kitchen. She stopped short as they walked through the door and into the penthouse.

"Wow! What a view you have from here. I thought the scene from the first floor was great but this is breathtaking." She walked over to the windows and looked down at the beach. "I bet there was no problem when you brought chicks . . ." she paused as she caught a glare from Samantha out of the corner of her eye. *That was incredibly stupid, Angel*, she thought to herself.

Totally changing the subject she turned back around toward the kitchen. "So, do I get the royal tour of this suite as well?" she asked, looking directly at Alex and avoiding eye contact with the green-eyed blonde in the kitchen.

"We'll take you around after we've eaten," Alex explained, "I think Samantha just about has lunch ready, don't you, Honey?" She made sure she threw in an endearment, as Samantha was again beginning to look none too happy, and Alex was regretting the invitation for Angel to stay with them. She was going to have to work with this woman and Samantha was going to have to learn to get along with her.

Sniffing the fragrant aroma coming from the kitchen she looked over at the stove, "Hey, that really smells good. What are you making Samantha?" Getting back to food was the way to her lover's heart and she was hoping the meal would be pleasant.

"Chili. I made enough for the folks to snack on if they happen to be hungry when they get here. It's ready if you two would just go sit down." Samantha turned back to the stove to pour the hot lunch into the bowls she already had waiting on the counter.

"Here, let me help with that," Alex said as she pointed out the table to Angel and headed into the kitchen.

"Thanks, Alex." Samantha gave her lover a wide grin. "You can take your bowl and Angel's, I can manage my own. Do you want a beer or just your water?"

Reaching for the filled bowls, Alex stretched a little closer and kissed Samantha gently on the cheek. "Thanks for going to all this trouble for lunch, it smells marvelous. I think I'll stick with water, after all the "folks" will be here shortly. Don't want them thinking I'm an alcoholic now, do we?"

"Point well taken," the small blonde smiled back at her admirer. "How about you, Angel, would you like something other than water with your meal?"

"No, thank you. Water will do just fine." Angel seated herself at the dining room table. It was already set with the water, silverware and napkins. Samantha had put out tortilla chips, melted cheese and chopped onions as garnish, so the chili was the only item missing for the meal to be complete. Angel could see that Sam worked very hard at making herself indispensable to Alex. It was a trait she had to admire even if she didn't find it endearing. "Table looks great and the chili smells marvelous."

"Thanks." Samantha smiled at the compliment, "Hope it tastes just as good." She finished filling her own bowl and joined the others at the table.



During the meal the topics bounced from the business, to the ocean view, to what there was to do in the area and finally to where Angel was going to go house/apartment/studio hunting. Samantha was as pleasant as she could muster but deep down felt a nagging tightness that didn't want to loosen its grip. When the meal was finally over Angel offered to help clean up but Samantha sent her on her way home hunting. She smiled as her new house guest left the room. *I hope the Gods are good to you today and that Athena helps you find a home expediently*, she thought as she verbally wished Angel happy hunting.

By the time the kitchen was straightened, the dishes cleaned and the rest of the chili put in the refrigerator, it was nearing time for the Rileys to arrive. Samantha found herself flitting from room to room checking to make sure everything was in its proper place and position. Alex finally had enough of the nervous movement and grabbed the smaller woman on her way from the bedroom back into the kitchen.

"Okay, okay, slow down." Intent blue eyes drilled a hole into the emerald ones staring back at her. "Honey, every thing looks absolutely fantastic!" She patted the couch with her hand. "There's not another thing you need to do but sit down here beside me and let your heart stop racing."

Samantha took a deep breath and sat down hard on the couch next to her lover.

"Samantha do you always get like this around your parents?"

"No! But it's the first time I've ever had anything that they didn't either buy, help buy, approve of first . . ."

"Whoa, girl . . . slow down!" Alex turned and held Samantha by the shoulders. "You are much too stressed. You've done a marvelous job at decorating this room, Samantha -- it's most definitely You. The guest suite is elegant and that also is mostly you. The spare room is All You . . . and the bedroom, well . . ." She gently wiped away a tear that could not help but fall from the misty green eyes watching her, ". . . there's still some of Me in the bedroom and kitchen," she grinned. "Your parents are going to love this place. They love you and you need to stop worrying."

Samantha grinned, "You're right, Alex. Give me a second to go wash up and I'll be just fine."

"That's my girl," Alex kissed her on the cheek and patted her on the butt as she rose and headed for the bathroom.

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Sally was the first to spot the building. "There it is, Daddy. That has to be it, it's the only building around." She stared up at the huge warehouse sitting alone on the top of a cliff. "It certainly is awesome."

"Perhaps a little ostentatious," came the remark from the gray-haired man driving.

"It's a warehouse, Don. How could you make it into anything other than what it is? I think it looks like a castle sitting there on the cliff. But instead of being dull and old looking, it's bright and rather pretty, don't you think so?"

"I guess," he all but grunted at his wife thinking to himself that he certainly could tell where Sam had gotten her wild imagination. *Castle -- The next thing she'll be thinking is that Samantha's Prince Charming will come and find her here. Silly women!* He shook his head slightly as he took another look at the enormous building and the surrounding area. "I don't know that I like Samantha living out here in the middle of nowhere and in a warehouse. It's dangerous."

"She's a big girl, Don. I'm sure she can take care of herself." It seemed as if she was always having to come to Samantha's defense. Sometimes she wished her oldest was a little more like her youngest daughter, not so much of an adventurous spirit. On the other hand she envied her daughter her enterprising motivation which had already taken her where Sheila herself never dared to venture.

Don pulled the car over in front of the building as Sally read the sign above the door, "Alternative Paradise", what an unusual name. I like it, the name could mean something different to each person who walked through the door."

"Sounds a little like mumbo jumbo to me, but if it's anything like what Samantha described to your mother, I may be able to turn this little vacation into a business trip." For the first time in an hour a small smile stole across the man's face.

"Lighten up, Don. We haven't seen Sammie in quite a while. Let's make this a fun visit, okay? She said she got us really good seats for the Pageant tomorrow night." Sheila smiled back at her daughter and then patted Don's arm as he turned off the ignition.

Sally was the first out of the car and she turned to open her mother's door for her. "Come on, Mom, I'm getting really excited now. I can't wait to see Sam."

Don shook his head at his youngest as he got out of the car and started walking up to the double doors leading to Alternative Paradise. He looked at the bell and the intercom and decided that the latter would probably get the quickest attention.

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Before Samantha had time to finish washing up the intercom sounded.

"Looks like it's curtain time, Samantha," Alex yelled as she went to answer the buzzer. Stopping mid-way she thought better of it. "Samantha, do you want to answer the intercom or should I?"

"Go ahead, Alex," the smaller woman yelled from the bathroom doorway.

"Okay." She pushed the button and a soft contralto voice addressed her unsuspecting in-laws for the first time. "Hello? Can I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Don Riley, is my daughter, Samantha, on the premises?" The voice was strong and deep and Alex could feel the sense of self in it.

"She's right here. We're on our way down to let you in." She turned to Samantha gave her a hug and kiss and told her once again that everything was going to go just as they had planned. With her arm around her lover's shoulder she walked her to the elevator and they rode in silence down to the first level.

Alex opened the double doors to the building, making sure that the first person the visitors saw was Samantha. She stepped back to observe the interaction of the little family. If Alex hadn't known better she would have sworn that Sally and Samantha were twins, the same green eyes and beautiful smile. They seemed to be the same height and very similar in built. The only easily noticeable difference between the two was that Sally wore her flaxen hair long and flowing down her back. On closer inspection it seemed that Sally also had a few more freckles dotting her friendly face than her older sister had. Alex smiled as the young woman threw her arms around her sister and kissed her. It warmed her heart to see that kind of love between sisters and almost made her wish she had one -- Almost!

Samantha's mom was next in line for hugs and kisses. Samantha eyes lit up when she saw her mother standing there. Samantha was about the same height as her mother, maybe a little taller. Alex could see the child emerging in the eyes of the woman she loved as that woman embraced her mother. After tears of joy, hugs and kisses, Samantha turned to face her father. He looked down at Samantha from a stature matching that of Alex's. He gave his daughter a good fatherly hug and kiss, then pushed her out at arms length to take a long look at the young woman he hadn't seen in months.

"Looks like you've lost weight. Are you eating right, Samantha?" His face took on a disapproving quality.

"Yes, Daddy. I'm eating just fine." Samantha answered, her head down. "Please don't embarrass me," she whispered. "There's someone I want you all to meet." Her voice perked up, as did her expression, when she stepped back and motioned for Alex to come forward.

"This is the owner of this beautiful establishment, my employer, my landlady and my friend, Alex Dor . . ."

"Alex will do, Samantha, we don't stand on formal ceremony here," Alex intervened when Samantha forgot and began to mention her last name. She reached out to grasp the strong, firm handshake of Samantha's father.

Samantha began to blush and hoped that her neither her father nor her mother would notice the color change. "Of course, you're right." Samantha said, looking away from her father and back to Alex, continuing with her introductions, "Alex this is Don Riley, my dad. This is my mom, Sheila and . . ." She turned and hugged the young woman next to her. " . . . my *little* sister Sally."

Sally gently punched Samantha in the arm then turned and smiled broadly at Alex, offering her hand.

Alex took her attention from Sam's dad and turned to acknowledge her introduction to the two women.

"Very nice to meet the two of you. I can see where Samantha gets her good looks and fair coloring," she flattered her lover's mother, "You look more like her older sister than her mom."

Sheila smiled as she slowly began to blush and Alex could see immediately another trait her Samantha had inherited from her mother.

Alex returned Sally's handshake and found it surprisingly strong.

"Well, we don't need to be staying around in the doorway all afternoon, Samantha has your weekend fairly well planned out." Again Alex turned to the rather stern looking man standing beside Samantha. "Mr. Riley, would you like some help getting the luggage from the van?"

"There's no need for you to trouble yourself, Alex," Don began, "Sally, Samantha and I can get it."

Alex could tell it was going to be a weekend of "who's in charge" but she had no intention of letting Samantha carry the luggage. "No, it's no problem at all. I thought Samantha could go ahead and take her mother on up to the suite and we could follow them with the luggage."

Feeling that the young woman standing in front of him was probably used to having her own way, he decided to let her have the advantage at this point, "Fine then, I guess we could use an extra pair of hands. Come on Sally." he looked over at his older daughter, "Samantha you go ahead up with your mother, we've got it covered here." He turned back to Alex, "By the way, Alex, you can call me Don. If we're going to be living under your roof for the weekend the least we can do is be on a first name basis."

"Sounds good to me, Don," Alex said as she walked beside him, stride by stride, on the way to the van.

Samantha turned to her mother and pointed to the entrance leading to the elevator.

"This is an enormous building, Samantha," her mother noted.

"It's unique, too, Mom. Inside there's a climbing wall, a track, two Jacuzzi tubs, a pool and gym and much more. We'll take you around for a full tour after you're settled in." She figured now was as good a time as any to explain where everyone would be staying. "By the way, sleeping arrangements have changed a little since we first knew you were coming down and staying here. Originally, Alex thought the best thing to do was to let you and Daddy have the suite to yourselves. I was going to share my room with Sally. But the other day Alex asked me if I would mind allowing a new employee, who was searching for a place to live here in Laguna, to use my

room for a few days. Of course, I said I didn't mind as you were using Alex's guest suite. So . . ." she smiled at her mother, "Sally gets to be the first to sleep on the sofa bed in the guest quarters and I'll be doubling up with Alex for the weekend." She had voiced the entire explanation much quicker than she had anticipated and sighed when she finished. She hoped the situation would sit well with her mother.

"Sammie, you could sleep on the pullout with your sister," her mother immediately responded. "I'm sure it's big enough for the two of you. That way you wouldn't have to bother Alex."

"Mom, I'm not *bothering* Alex. You forget we're friends. It would be like sleeping over at Janie's house when I was young. Besides there's only one bathroom where you guys are sleeping and it would be crowded with four of us trying to get into it when we're getting ready to go out. I'll be just fine and everyone will have plenty of room."

"That's awfully nice of Alex to put that other person up for a couple days. I hope he appreciates it." Sheila was getting a little disturbed as to exactly what type of environment Samantha was living in. "Alex seems to make a habit of offering people a place to stay."

"He's a She, Mom. Her name is Angel, and you'll probably meet her later tonight. She's moving up here from San Diego and will only be staying until she finds a place -- which could be today. She's out looking as we speak. As for Alex offering people a place to stay . . ." Samantha mustered all the patience she could and tried to explain so her mother would understand. She knew her mother was probably thinking the worst and tried to waylay all her insecurities of inappropriate conduct. "This is a very large building and there certainly is not a lack of living space as you will see when we show you around. When she offered for me to move in, it was because she wanted some company occasionally. She offered Angel because she felt it was ridiculous for her to have to pay for a hotel when there was an extra bedroom." *If you only knew the Truth!* She thought to herself.

They had reached the third floor and Samantha pointed out the direction of the penthouse and the extra bedroom, before directing her mom toward the guest suite.

It seems as though they had barely begun to look around the suite before the three luggage carriers arrived.

"Don, this place is gorgeous! We have a small view of the ocean from the bedroom as well as a panorama of the Laguna Hills. I feel like I'm in a Five Star Hotel." Sheila beamed at her husband as Alex proceeded him into the bedroom area, suitcase in tow.

"I'm glad you like the place, Sheila. It was just completed a little bit ago, so your timing is perfect." She put on her most charming smile as she opened the curtains further to expose the vistas. "If you're lucky, maybe Samantha will allow a little time to explore the beach area, but I think she has you pretty booked up for the entire stay."

"Now, Alex," Samantha joined in, "If they want to go down to the beach we have between now and whenever you make that reservation for dinner tonight." She threw a friendly smile in the direction of her lover, making sure she kept the distance that already was, between them.

"A walk on the beach sounds like fun," chimed in Sally, putting her baggage on the floor beside her. "Do you think we could?"

"Is anyone hungry?" Sheila asked.

"I am," Don replied. "Samantha is there somewhere we could go for lunch?"

"I've already made chili for lunch," Samantha answered her father. Alex and I ate a little while ago, but why don't I heat some up while you are unpacking and then you can eat and we can all go for a walk on the beach."

The consensus seemed to be to go along with Samantha's plan. She gave directions as to which halls to follow that lead to the apartment and she and Alex left them to unpack, change from their traveling clothes and freshen up.

Reaching the apartment, they entered and Alex closed the door, standing with her back against it.

"Alex, they'll feel funny if they walk up here and the door's closed," Samantha stated as she began to reach around her lover to open the door.

"Not so fast," came the reply, as two strong arms came to rest on the shorter woman's shoulders. "I think things are getting off to an excellent start, but I need an incentive to keep on being so charming." She smiled and bent down, placing a gentle kiss on her lover's lips. "Do you know how difficult it is for me to not look at you like you are my world? Do you know how hard it is to keep a formal distance between us?"

Sparkling green eyes looked up and Samantha kissed Alex back before responding, "I know exactly how tough it is. Actually, I almost cost us the entire weekend. If you hadn't been quick to save me from spewing out your last name we might be standing here with no visitors at all!" She hugged Alex close, "I love you so much, Alex, this is going to be a difficult three days."

"Difficult, but not impossible," the taller woman answered as she allowed her hands to stray, caressing her partner and causing Samantha to shiver with love bumps.

"Stop that, Alex. I have to go get the chili heated. Behave! You promised to behave." Try as she might, she could not keep from smiling while reprimanding her lover. There was no way she could really get mad at Alex for doing precisely what she wanted her to do.

"Okay, party pooper, go fix your family some sustenance. I'll go take a cold shower."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, come on, help me get things ready."

Alex reluctantly let Samantha go and opened the door. Within minutes the table was set and the meal was warmed. All was ready and waiting when the three travelers arrived at the apartment door.

"Knock, knock," came the greeting from Sheila as she tapped on the doorframe leading into the living area.

"Come on in," Samantha answered from the vicinity of the living room as she had finished helping Alex pick out some music to play while dining.

Sally was the first to reach the floor-to-ceiling windows and to comment on the view. "This is unbelievable! I thought only movie stars and millionaires lived with scenery like this. Come here, Mom, look at this seascape!"

Don looked around as his wife and daughter seemed to be taken by the elegance of the apartment and its view. He then turned to Alex, "We've got a nice view of the lake where we live, not quite as expansive as this, but very pretty. There's a big difference between an ocean view and one with trees and a lake."

"Most definitely," Alex quickly agreed, feeling that the man was trying to defend his choice areas to live. "I've often envied those who had the seclusion of lake living, surrounded by the woods." *I hope that soothes your ego, Mr. Man. You really are going to be a force to deal with this weekend aren't you. Does Samantha ever do anything right in your eyes.* She mumbled in her mind, while smiling at the problem standing before her.

Samantha smiled inwardly, hearing how quickly and smoothly Alex had handled her father's little dealings with envy. It was at this point that she decided to corral everyone over to the table. "Lunch is served. Come and get it while it's still hot."

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It was decided during the meal that a tour of the Center would directly follow and the walk on the beach would follow that. Dinner was set for between 7:30 and 8:00 so there was plenty of time. Samantha informed everyone that she had planned for a trip to Laguna after breakfast in the morning for some shopping, then the Pageant and a later dinner that night. Sunday morning and afternoon would be occupied with the Festival and they had to leave Laguna to catch their plane by 9:00 p.m. Free time was at a minimum, Samantha tried her best to fill every minute of the days doing something interesting and exciting. Alex was proud of the way Sam had organized the entire weekend and only hoped that her father would at least be appreciative of his daughter's undertakings.

Everyone enjoyed the meal except for an off-handed criticism from Don that he didn't think Sam had her mother's recipe -- he concluded that her mother's chili was not quite as spicy.

Alex, at first, was not going to comment but she couldn't help coming to her lover's rescue, stating that she, herself, had added a little extra hot chili to the pot after having had some this

morning. She told him to blame it on the fact that she was a native Californian and they were used to eating Mexican food that was twice as spicy as the chili they had just eaten.

Samantha threw her a quick thank you glance and smiled meekly, trying to ignore another put down from her father.

Alex could see with half a brain why Samantha didn't want to live around the obnoxious, need-to-be--the-best, poor excuse for a man, she knew as "Daddy." She wondered how such a marvelous creature could have evolved under his pressure and criticism. Spending time with her mother had to have been the only reason Samantha survived and thrived. *It's going to be a Long Weekend*, came to be a statement that she would repeat over and over in her thoughts.

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With the middle meal of the day finally consumed, next on the agenda was to give a complete and thorough tour of the facility, a chore Alex was looking less and less forward to, but one she would never think of relinquishing to Samantha on her own.

They started down on the first floor in the area of the climbing wall and Alex was extremely happy that Sally at least was adequately responsive to the enormity of the wall. She seemed to be very much like Samantha in many ways which immediately endeared her to the dark-haired Amazon leading the tour. Occasionally Samantha would leave her mother or father's side and come up beside Alex to remind her of some little speciality of the Center she may have overlooked. It was at these times that as Alex was about to put her arms instinctively around lover's shoulders she would, instead, quickly thrust her hands deep into her pockets so as not to perform the faux pas. She was sure, however, that there were several occasions when Sam would purposely get too close while they were taking their little trek through the building, rubbing against her just long enough to elicit goose bumps up and down her body then turning with an impish smile to gloat, knowing the reaction she had on her lover.

Don asked many questions when it came to the equipment and the suppliers. Alex danced around her answers stating that she had not actually decided on who she would continue to use in the future. He offered his business card and during the remainder of the tour she got more than an earful of how good his company was and how they outranked their competitors by enormous margins year after year in services and goods. He even got in a dig or two about their major competitor, Have It All. Samantha cringed when heard her father speak the company's name and was relieved that he did not go into detail about their top salesperson. It was about that time that Alex stole a look back at the small blonde who merely shook her head smiling. Alex was barely able to hide the daggers in her eyes she was throwing at her lover for exposing her to the pompous man who was trying his best to impress Alex and make a family vacation into a business accomplishment.

Samantha's mother was quiet through most of the grand tour, adding only a small, "Isn't that lovely, Dear," and occasionally commenting on the beautiful view the people would have while doing whatever it was they were doing. The only elaborate response she had came when they entered the area of the swimming pool. She immediately fell in love with it. She couldn't say



enough about the sea creatures and how lifelike they looked, that is, until Don stifled her with a simple, "That's enough, Sheila. We get the point. You like the pool. Can we continue?"

Sheila of course, stopped talking, blushed a little and turned to Samantha grabbing her arm, "Come on, Dear, show us the rest of this lovely place." The troupe moved on to another area, Samantha patting her mother's arm, Sally glaring at her dad and Alex thinking to herself, *It's going to be a Long Weekend!*

Sally had been vibrant and interested throughout the entire ordeal, but Alex could feel her emerald eyes boring a hole into her as they walked from room to room. She was afraid to look at Samantha for fear that Sally had somehow figured out their relationship and was waiting for one or the other of them to make a fatal mistake and give themselves away. Alex was not going to give Samantha's little sister the satisfaction of outing them so she steered as far away from Samantha as she could during most of the afternoon.

When every room had been explored and explained, Alex found herself physically tired of smiling and talking and mentally tired of dealing with 'dear old dad'. She graciously bowed out of making the excursion to the beach and when Samantha confronted her she quietly stated that her parents may find it just a little strange if she were to tag along for absolutely everything they did all weekend. She contemplated threatening to back out of going into town with them in the morning as well if Samantha didn't cut her a little slack, but was saved by Angel coming back from her house hunting jaunt with, from the look on her face, good news.

In front of the entire group Alex announced that she and Angel were going upstairs to discuss her luck in the house hunting, and for them to go ahead without her and have a good time on the beach.

It was obvious that Samantha was not at all happy about leaving Alex alone in the presence of the new employee, and even her mother commented that Alex may have other pressing matters that needed her attention and that they could find the beach quiet easily without her assistance.

Samantha glared in Angel's direction, a look that was not lost on either Angel, Alex or Sally for that matter. Lucky for Sam her parents were talking together over in the gym area when the green-eyed monster decided to show her little head. They totally missed the final exchange between their older daughter and the new arrival.

Angel excused herself to go to the car and get some paperwork she needed to read over and told Alex she'd meet up with her in the kitchen in a minute.

Samantha decided she was going to ride up in the elevator with her lover. She made some lame excuse about changing shoes and going to grab some towels and motioned to her sister to take their parents on out. She said she'd be right back down.

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The ride up in the elevator was anything but a pleasant adventure. The two had been separated for a good two hours while touring the building, trying to keep from touching each other. Now here they were at each other's throats like an old married couple.

"Samantha what's wrong with you? You know it's best if I don't come with you. Beaches for us are an aphrodisiac - I'm not going to go walking along with my hands in my pocket the entire rest of the afternoon."

"Did you see how Angel looked at you when she came in?" was all the response she was going to get from Samantha, her green eyes narrowed and hard.

"Please, Honey. You've had a horribly taxing morning and afternoon. Let's not make this into something we'll both regret. I truly think she's rented a place and I can tell you right now, nothing would please me more!" She put her hands on Samantha's shoulders and felt the tightness under her fingertips.

"Samantha, you are as hard as a rock. You're getting a massage first thing Monday morning from one of the therapists. Hopefully sometime this weekend I'll be able to work a few of the kinks out. I don't believe how tight you are." She worked her fingers into the solid shoulders, trying to ease some of the knots.

"I'm sorry, Alex, but I really don't like that woman. I'll try to get along with her because you need her professionally, but I'm going to find it terribly difficult to deal with her as a friend. My head tells me I'm acting foolishly but my gut says I'm right."

"Listen, Samantha," Alex pulled her close and held her tightly. "Go down and have a good time on the beach with your family. I'm going to get a beer and listen to Angel's house hunting tale -- that's all I'm going to do. With any luck she'll be moving out next week and things can get back to normal around here. If you can't trust me now -- you'll never be able to trust me." She gently placed a finger under Samantha's chin and tilted the face she adored up in a position to be kissed.

Samantha eagerly kissed her lover back as she held her tightly. When they parted a smile had replaced the look of anger on the smaller woman's face. "I know Alex, you're right. I'll just change my shoes and grab some towels so we can clean off before we come back in. Are you gonna call for dinner reservations while we're gone?"

"Sure, I am -- have the place all picked out. I love you Samantha."

"Me, too, you." came the quick reply.

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The walk on the beach had originally seemed like a good idea. Samantha hadn't known it was going to turn into inquisition concerning Alex's background and financial status.

"Where does a young woman Alex's age get the money to fund an establishment as large as that?" was the first sentence out of her father's mouth when they reached the shoreline and began traveling north.

"If you really want to know, Don, why don't you ask her at dinner, I'm sure she'll tell you." Sheila interjected, trying to take the pressure off her daughter.

"I was asking Samantha, Sheila," he barked at his wife while turning back to his daughter.

"So, Samantha?"

"Well, Daddy, I'm not totally sure. I know she has partners and I know she's been working in the field for quite a while." Samantha was at a loss as to where this conversation was leading.

She was saved from further questioning when Sally came up from behind and challenged her to a race in the sand. Samantha gleefully left her parents behind as she ran off down the beach with her sister, not caring in the least if she won or lost, just happy not to have to answer any more of her father's questions. This was going to be a difficult weekend she could already tell.

The girls turned around about a quarter of a mile down the beach and headed back toward their parents, going a little slower and talking mostly about how their parents didn't seem to really be getting along very well. Sally thought that the rift between them had seemed to grow since Samantha had left home.

"Are you blaming me, Sally?" Sam wanted to know.

"Oh, no, Sammie. You're leaving was the best thing you ever did for yourself and it broke the ground for me when I decide to leave which will probably be very soon." She took her sister's hand. "Come on, let's go see if Alex has those reservations booked you were talking about."

They met up with their parents and the four Rileys walked back up to the warehouse on the cliff.

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Cassie had looked through the telescope and noticed a new vehicle parked at the site of her obsession when she arrived home early from work. She turned the mic on full blast and went to get something to drink from the refrigerator. For a long while there was nothing but silence, then she heard the elevator doors open and the sound of unhappy voices. It seemed that Samantha was unhappy about some little chickie by the name of Angel. *What a shame, Samantha. Trouble in Paradise??* Cassandra smiled into her beer as she refocused the telescope on the outside of the building and notice yet another car parked in front of the building.

"Goody," she said to no one in particular, "I think this is getting interesting. I would imagine one car belongs to the little darling Samantha's not happy about and the other must mean that the "folks" have arrived."

A few minutes more of silence and she heard the elevator start back up. This time the ride was totally silent.

Looking through the telescope she waited until she saw Samantha come out the front door as another woman of similar size but with dark hair like Alex's go into the building.

Focusing the scope on Samantha she followed the blonde as she walked toward the beach stairs. Standing on the platform, Cassandra spotted three other people. "Ah, ha! Mommy, Daddy and little Sis. Hail, hail the family's here!"

Cassie moved back from the eyepiece of the telescope, walked over to the microphone and turned it off. She lifted her bottle high, pointing it in the direction of the warehouse as she prepared to toast the little clan with a predatory grin, "To a weekend full of fun and frolic!"

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The majority of the evening went pretty much as anticipated. Alex made reservations at one of Laguna's most elegant restaurants by the sea to show off the savoir faire of her little beach town. Impressing Don Riley had become top priority of things to do this weekend.

During dinner, business was discussed only when Don brought it up, but he did manage to do so often, as though that was the only topic of conversation he was really good at. He asked Alex how she came to pick Samantha as an assistant when Sam had so little business background. As Samantha sunk visibly lower into her seat and tried to carry on a conversation with her mother, Alex explained that he probably, if he would think about it, knew exactly why she had chosen someone like Samantha.

"Think about it Don, when you get a new sales crew, aren't the ones who are really green yet eager the best to take under your wing? They can be molded successfully into a replica of yourself." Perfect white teeth and brilliant blues eyes smiled as sincere a smile as she could summon as she looked at the man sitting across the table from her. *It's going to be a Long Weekend*, repeated itself in her mind.

"Yes, Alex, I do understand. That's a very wise business move." Don agreed.

When it came time to pay the tab Don offered but Alex quickly informed him that when she had made the reservations she had mentioned that her new assistant and her assistant's family would be dining with her this evening. The owner, being an old college friend of Alex's, insisted that the dinner be 'on the house'. She hadn't wanted to hurt her friend's feeling so of course accepted for all involved.

Don seemed please with the explanation and the dinner ended on a pleasant note.

By the time they had arrived back at the warehouse it was already quite late and because of the anticipation of a busy day and evening coming tomorrow they all decided that calling it a night was the sensible thing to do.

Alex, always the gracious hostess, alluded to the pleasure of meeting everyone, wished them all a good evening and left Samantha with her family to say her own good nights.

It didn't take Sam long to wrap up the hugs, kisses and 'so glad you're all here' phrases before she was on her way back to the apartment.

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Samantha walked directly into the kitchen to get a glass of water, some vitamin B pills and an aspirin, she hadn't had as much to drink as before, but she now knew her reaction to champagne and they had finished off two bottles at dinner. She was taking no chances of waking up with a hangover like she had the last time she drank too much.

She thought she heard Alex pass the kitchen but when she turned around, no one was there. Finishing off her preventatives she refilled the water glass and headed for the bedroom. Thankful that she would finally get to hold and be held by Alex after this long and grueling day.

"Come here, you," the tall beauty reached out long arms in the direction of the small blonde standing in the bedroom doorway. "I've locked the door to this area of the house," sapphire eyes twinkled in the glow of the shimmering candles.

"I thought I felt you go past the kitchen -- you're a quiet little bugger when you want to be." She smiled at the figure spread out on the bed.

"It's been a long day of short glances and few touches. We're finally alone and I feel like I'm going through detox . . . get over here before I come and get you." She feigned getting off the bed as Samantha was still standing in the doorway, staring in her direction.

"Do you know how beautiful you are Alexis Dorian?" Samantha turned off the bathroom light and walked toward her lover. "If I had to make a choice between the panorama out our bedroom window or looking into your eyes, my decision would be immediate; spending eternity looking into your face would, without a doubt, be the choice I would make." She climbed onto the bed and into the arms of her waiting lover. Warmth surrounded her and she felt safe. The day had been a bit harrowing at times but to end up here, in these arms of love, she would gladly have endured any hardship.

"Eternity it is then, my love." Alex began kissing Samantha starting at the crown of her head, nibbling on her ears and continuing down her neck to her smooth firm breasts. Fingers, lips and tongue took in every inch of soft skin they came in contact with.

Involuntary whimpers came from the small blonde as affection continued to be lavished upon her. She reached up to help Alex discard her own nightshirt, their bodies never losing contact with each other.

"I've been waiting all day to ravish you, Samantha," the soft contralto voice whispered. "I'm going to make you come until you're exhausted."

More whimpering from the smaller body beneath her, urged Alex to continue the movement of her lips and hands. She slowly traced her fingers down Samantha's side, brushing her thighs on the outside before turning to the inside and bringing her fingers back up toward the golden mound and the treasures hidden beneath it. Just as she was about to enter her lover there came a small knock on the entrance door, followed by "Samantha, you still awake?"

"No, Samantha, No!" Alex breathed into her lover's ear, "Pretend you're asleep."

"Oh, shit," came the countered reaction from the blonde, "Honey, I can't . . ."

"Why not??"

"Alex . . . she's my sister . . . I have to go see what she wants . . ."

There was a repetition of both the knock and the question, followed by, "Sammie, answer the door, I want to talk to you."

Alex flopped back on the bed, her heart racing as she sighed. "I guess if you have to go, you have to go," she sighed again in resignation. "I'll be here waiting when you get done." She grabbed after Samantha's butt as her lover left the bed but just fell short of reaching it.

"Honey, I'll try to get her gone quickly, but I haven't really talked to her in months. She probably feels like we won't have any free time during the weekend to be alone and gossip, and she's right. I know you understand . . . or if you don't I hope you'll be patient anyway. I love you Alex." She grabbed up her nightshirt, blew a kiss in the direction of the exasperated brunette, closed the door behind her and answered her sister. "I'm coming Sally, be right there."

Pulling on her nightshirt, she breathed a deep breath and hurried to the door. "Sally is something wrong?"

"No, I just wanted to have some time to talk with you, you know that thing we used to do all the time at home -- talk! I know we won't have a spare minute when Mom and Dad are up so, this is the only time we have to play 'catch up'. By the way, why'd ya lock the door?"

She passed over the question quickly with a wave, "It was locked? Alex must have done it accidentally. Want something to drink?"

"Sure - what'd ya got?"

"Sally, why don't you tell me what you want and I'll tell you if I have it? It's a lot easier than going through the list from juice to wine." She looked at her younger sibling, shaking her head.

"What about a pot of tea, your choice."

Samantha agreed and motioned for Sally to sit on the couch while she proceeded to the kitchen to brew the tea.

When she came back into the living room she found that her sister had taken the large pillows and arranged them on the floor near the windows in her favorite spot. Sometimes it amazed her how much alike they were, just as it amazed her at how different they could be. She loved her sister and was glad they had such a good relationship. She knew many people who didn't get along with their siblings, perhaps those people had nothing in common, even though they were born into the same family.

Samantha walked over and sat down next to Sally, the two of them for a moment simply taking in the fantastic view from the third floor penthouse, at the edge of a small beach town, a lifetime away from where they were born and grew up.

Sally finally broke the silence, "It's breathtaking, Sam. You don't know how lucky you are to be here in this place, doing what I guess you are liking." She turned to her sister, looking at a slightly older rendition of herself and a younger one of her mother. "But, I really miss you being at home, or at least within a driving distance." The younger woman's eyes began to mist over as her older sister drew her into an embrace.

"I miss you, too, Sally. I'm sorry I'm so far away, but only because of you. Other than that this is the most perfect place on the planet for me. I've finally found my niche. I love being here and I know I'm going to love my new career. *And I love my boss most of all*, came next into her mind but not out of her lips. "So what have you been doing with yourself lately, any new beaus?" She knew that would get a smile out of her sister and waited patiently for the answer.

They talked a little about what had been happening at home, how Daddy was unhappy with her move to California, especially since it seemed so permanent. He had made life at home quite miserable for the past couple months. She told her sister how much she and their mother relished the peace when he was away on a business trip. Finally the conversation turned back around to Samantha as Sally had a ton of questions she wanted answered.

"Okay, Sammie, your turn to play 'fill in the sister'. How did you find this place and this job?"

Samantha went into great detail telling about the night she and Alex first met, leaving out the fact that she had been infatuated with the tall, dark-haired beauty since she first laid eyes on her and not bothering to go into detail about the second night and the fateful fall from the climbing wall. After all the generic statements, Sally began to ask specifics.

"You know, Sis, I've noticed that you smile a lot when Alex is in the room, and she does the same thing. Actually, I've noticed that she looks at you a lot." Sally had a mischievous grin on her face and Samantha was dreading the question to come.

"So . . . I noticed you've not mentioned any "male" friends down here in sunny California. Is this a woman only town?" the younger sister queried.

"Don't be ridiculous, of course there are guys here. Lots of them actually. Playing volleyball and basketball down on the courts next to the beach. This town has a large variety of people from different lands, cultures, backgrounds . . ."

"Sexual orientation?"

"What??"

"You heard me, I didn't stutter. What do you think I am, stupid?! I am be younger than you Sam, but I'm not still wet behind the ears."

"Sally, I . . ."

"Do you realize that every time you get close to Alex, she puts her hands in her pockets? Is she used to putting them somewhere else when she's near you?" The glint in the younger woman's eyes was sparkling as she watched her sister squirm. "And . . ." she continued, "you almost slipped and said Alex's last name when introducing her, but she seemed to not want to you finish. What's the lady's last name, Rockefeller? To top it all off, most people would think it a little strange for your 'boss' to be wining and dining your family. Why would she want to do that?"

"It that what Daddy and Mom are thinking? Are they wondering why Alex is paying for dinner and the Pageant?" Samantha was beginning to get a little worried.

"Actually, I don't think either one of them think beyond the fact that someone else is picking up the tab and I don't think you actually confided in them that Alex paid for the Pageant tickets. I'm the one who's doing the wondering. The major clincher was the fit you nearly threw when Alex didn't want to come walking on the beach this afternoon but wanted to stay and find out about Angel's luck with finding a place to live. What's with the green-eyed monster, Sammie? What's all the mystery about?"

Guessing it was time to fess up and confide in her little sister, Samantha took a deep breath. Sally would either embrace the fact that she had finally found happiness and love or she would disown her as a sister. Samantha was definitely counting on the former.

"Haven't you become the observant woman of the world in the short amount of time I've been gone from home," she began.

"It hasn't been that short a period of time, Sammie. You've really been gone since you left for college and I guess you haven't wanted to see that I've changed, too. I've grown up, just like you did." She looked at her sister with somber green eyes. "So . . . fill me in on your life, Samantha."

"I'm in love, Sally. For the first time in my life I feel as though I actually belong. This is my home now and my heart is here. I think I fell in love with Alex the moment I saw her. I won't apologize for the way I feel, and I sincerely hope you have grown enough to accept us into your life." She stared into eyes almost identical to her own, searching for a sign of disappointment or rejection but she found none. The eyes looking intently back at her began to sparkle as a smile christened her sister's face.



Sally threw her arms around Samantha, "Oh, Sammie, I just knew California would be good for you. You've been a lost soul for such a long time. I just knew they way you looked at Alex and the way she looked at you . . . I just knew you had to be lovers."

Samantha laughed with her sister and then held her back at arms length, becoming quite serious. "If it was so easily spotted by you, do you think Mom and Daddy have any idea?"

"No!" came the immediate response. "I've met a lot of lesbians in college and can just tell, or at least I tell my self I can. Mom and Dad, on the other hand, have no clue! Besides, I know you Sam, probably better than you know yourself sometimes, and you've never been attracted -- really attracted -- to anyone I've ever seen you with. You positively beam when Alex enters the room. You should have seen the look on your face when you introduced her."

"That transparent, huh?"

"Oh, yeah! But I think it's marvelous. Besides you're being happy, which is very important to me, look at where you get to live and -- I get to visit -- anytime I want!!"

Samantha's heart was doing flips of joy, knowing that at least her sister would accept her new place in the world and accept Alex along with her.

"By the way, Samantha, your Alex is quite a 'looker'."

"She is beautiful, isn't she? But she's as much brain as she is beauty with a hearty dose of brawn thrown in . . ."

"And," Sally added, "seems like she's not too shabby in the wealth department, either."

"That's just like icing on the cake," Samantha conceded, "I'd love her if she was dirt poor, like me."

"I'm sure you would, Sis."

"Daddy seemed very interested in where Alex got the money for the Center. To tell you the truth, Sally, I don't know where Alex's money comes from. It hasn't become a topic of discussion yet. Funny thing is though, wouldn't Daddy be surprised if he knew that I finally did the one thing he's been wanting me to do all these years, I've caught myself a "good provider"! She tittered at the thought of her father actually finding out her relationship to Alex and the fact that his reaction would be anything but congratulatory.

"Anyhow," Sally continued, "I just wanted to let you know that I knew or at least thought I knew and that I approve. Not that you'd need my approval." She smiled again at her sister. "I'm thrilled for you, Samantha. I feel good about the whole situation because she seems to have made you happy and that's important to me."

"Thanks, Sally. You don't know how good it feels to be accepted by someone I love. I didn't want to tell you, because I was afraid you might turn on me like I know Daddy would if he ever found out."

The smile faded from Sally's face, "I'm a little disappointed that you didn't have more faith in me, Sammie, but I do think it's best to keep your lifestyle under wraps around Daddy. And if you told Mom . . . well, she eventually tells Daddy everything so I guess it's best to try to keep it from both of them for as long as you can."

"I certainly intend to try. I just hope I don't become as transparent to them as I am to you. I guess I'll have to tell Alex to keep her hands out of her pockets and I'll have to try to smile less." She grinned over at her sister. "You don't know what a load this is off my heart, Sally." Her eyes teared up as she looked at her sister and quietly thanked the Gods for keeping her on her side. "We've been best friends for a long time now, you and I, and I'm really glad we can continue being that to each other. I love you, Sally."

"I love you, too, Samantha." Having accomplished what she came to talk to her sister about she figured it was time they both get a little rest before the sun came up. "Guess I'd better tiptoe back to my own couch and try to catch a few dreams before we have to deal with the day you have planned. I just couldn't let the night go by without having this heart-to-heart with my favorite Sis."

"I'm glad we had the time to have this talk. It was kinda like old times when we used to watch the sun come up when I came home from college for a visit." She walked her sister to the entrance and watched as she walked back toward the suite. She glanced toward the clock on the microwave. "See you later in the morning, Sally."

"Yeah," her sister answered as she neared the end of the hall, "gonna be a short sleep."

Samantha walked back into the living room, picked up the teacups and put them in the dishwasher before going back to the bedroom. Turning out the lights she walked back over to the windows and looked down at the sea bathed in silver moonlight. "This is my home. My heart is here; my Alex is here. I send a heartfelt thanks to whoever it is who watches over me. I feel luckier tonight than I ever have in my entire life. I have my home, my love and I still have my sister." She walked over and opened the bedroom door. Starlight and moon beams had found their way into the dark room, casting a halo of light on the sleeping body in the middle of the bed. Samantha's heart raced in her chest as she looked upon the vision that lit up her life. Trying her best not to disturb her dark angel, she crawled gently into bed, took the pillow from her place in Alex's arms and placed her body where it had become accustomed to sleeping. Alex immediately embraced the familiar figure as she kissed Samantha on the head. "I love you, Samantha," the dark-haired beauty murmured in her sleep. "I love you, too," Samantha whispered back. What was left of the night was short but her heart felt pounds lighter and sleep, when it finally came, was sweet.

Concluded in Part 20.

## ~ Laguna Nights ~

by Carole Giorgio

**Violence Warning/Disclaimer:** This story depicts scenes of some violence, but not a lot.

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and a sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age, if lesbian relationships offend you or if this type of story is illegal in the state, province or country in which you live, please do not go any further. Go back to making cookies, go play with your toys or go visit the Disney site but do not read this story.

**Standard Disclaimer:** I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is Laguna Beach, Calif. and most of the places depicted are real. It is a present time love story.

**Kudos:** To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Pat and Loki for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself and to my daughter, Nicole, for constant encouragement. Thanks to you for reading it.

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### Part 20

#### Chapter 20

"Wake up sleepy head. You've got a full day planned for everyone, and you need to be on time." Alex gently shook the small blonde who had curled herself into a ball the minute Alex had left the bed.

Her answer was a very unusual response, "We're not very good actresses."

"Excuse me??" Alex thought perhaps Samantha was talking in her sleep.

"I said," Samantha enunciated slowly and clearly as she opened her eyes and sat up, "We Are Not Very Good Actresses."

Alex stared at the person on the bed in total confusion. "What the Hell is that supposed to mean? I don't do cryptic well first thing in the morning."

"It means we got caught yesterday." She did her best not to smile at the tall beauty standing at the end of the bed dressed only in a pair of khaki cargo shorts. *What a sight to wake up to*, she thought to herself, wishing they were alone in the apartment instead of having their home full of visitors -- mostly her visitors.

"Caught doing what? I didn't do anything that I would be caught at! Samantha, why don't you just tell me clearly what it is you're rambling about?"

"Alex, you went around half the day yesterday with your hands in your pockets and it seems I went around half the day smiling at you. My sister said we couldn't have been more 'obvious' if we tried."

"No! Shit! Your sister knows we're gay?"

"Yeah! That's what part of the talk was about last night, or early this morning I should say." Samantha smiled at Alex.

"Well, from the look on your face, I take it that Sally is the only one who figured it out and that she really doesn't care. Right?" Alex mentally crossed her fingers but assumed she would be looking at a despondent Samantha instead of a happy one if the outcome hadn't been positive.

"Actually, she's very happy for us." Samantha beamed. "She said she knew California would be good for me."

"You know, Honey, maybe it would be better if I backed off the shopping trip this morning . . ."

"No, Alex . . ."

"Samantha -- think -- if your sister could come to that conclusion in one afternoon, perhaps your parents would be able to do the same if I tag along everywhere you go."

Samantha closed the gap between them, placing one arm around Alex's waist, putting her head down on her lover's bare chest and playfully toying with one of the breasts that were too close to her mouth to be ignored. "But I was looking forward to us all going together." She kissed the soft skin, watching as the nipple became erect, then looked up into brilliant blue eyes and innocently batted her lashes.

"No, Samantha." Alex grinned down at her lover, one eyebrow raised, "That won't work today." She placed her hands on Samantha's shoulders and held the smaller woman at arms' length.

"Listen to me, really listen. Remember I told you that Angel rented that studio she found in the paper yesterday. It's already empty and ready to move in. The landlord even gave her the key yesterday and the utilities are still on. If I stay back today and help her move in, then when your family leaves on Sunday we will have the entire place to ourselves."

Samantha started to object but was stopped by two long fingers gently persuading her to listen instead of talk.

"Come on, Samantha. Your parents came down to visit with you, not with a stranger. If I go with you today, all your dad will want to do is try to sell me on using ZZ Medi-aide as my supplier. You don't want to hear him talking business the entire trip, now do you?" She smiled . . . "I know I don't."

"But I don't want you spending the entire day with Angel, either," came the whimper from the small blonde.

"I'm not even going to acknowledge that. Now come on and get dressed. Are your people early risers?"

"Not as early as yours are," Samantha answered, walking into the bathroom and starting the shower. "I'd ask you to join me, but it looks like you're already halfway dressed. I do hope you intend to put a top on before we have guests?"

"Why, no," came the snide remark. "I thought I stay like this for the day, women's lib and all that! Not only do I go bra-less -- I go top-less!" She looked at her lover with an exceedingly dangerous smile, "Beside, I thought Angel would appreciate this outfit."

Samantha grabbed the nearest towel and rolled it into a weapon, slashing out at the tall figure standing not three feet from her.

"Ouch, that stung," Alex complained grabbing her leg where the towel had just slapped her.

"That was the intention," the small blonde countered. "I used to be pretty good at turning a damp dish towel into a weapon. Just ask Sally when you see her."

"You have the advantage. I didn't have anyone to torture growing up." Alex quickly dodged the onslaught of towel tips and grabbed Samantha's hand. "But . . . now that you're here . . . I can always play catch-up." She took the towel from the smaller woman's grasp and turned the tables on her.

"I'm a Very quick study," she smiled as she rolled the towel into a tight twisted length. "Plus I have all that pent up energy I didn't get to extinguish last night." She snapped the towel toward the blonde who quickly dodged it.

"I'm sorry about last night -- don't you think I wanted to end the evening on a romantic note just as much as you did?" She jumped again as Alex wielded the towel. "You are a quick study!"

Alex smiled as she purposely missed the small woman she adored. "To tell you the truth, I don't have siblings as you know, but I do have cousins and if I really wanted to go after you with this towel, you'd be welted by now." She threw the cloth in the air in a gesture of truce.

Walking over to Samantha she put her arms on her lover's shoulders, "Seriously, Honey, I know you had to stay and talk to your sister last night. I'll have you beside me for the rest of my life,

I'm sure I can spare the small amount of time your family takes away from me." She leaned over and kissed Samantha, her tongue beginning to explore the soft inner reaches of her lover's mouth.

Samantha's knees grew weak as she stood in the bathroom kissing Alex, and feeling the warmth of her lover's body against her own. Her mind raced between what was happening to her body and the fact that she didn't want Alex to spend the day with Angel. *Let it go* she kept telling herself, *You have to trust her even if you don't trust Angel, remember what you said to her about trusting you with Bryan?* It was hard to concentrate on the kiss and think about the situation at hand. *To Tartarus with Angel!!* She put her fears on the back burner and let herself enjoy the moment.

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It was almost 11:30 by the time The Riley clan was gathered in the elevator. Alex had given Samantha directions to the best restaurant for breakfast and reminded her of some of the speciality establishments in the little town. Samantha's mom was ready for a shopping tour and her dad seemed pleased that it would just be his little family going on the outing.

*As the elevator door shut, the last face Alex saw was Samantha's, a look of love decorating it as the rest of her family stood behind her. Alex smiled back, pulling a mask over her emotions with a simple, "Bye, have fun."*

*The door closed and the smile faded from Alex's lips. She wondered to herself if she had made the right choice to stay behind and help Angel. She would have liked to have gone, but the more time spent with the Riley's en masse, the more chance of their figuring out that the young women were more than just friends. She didn't want an upset the first time she met Samantha's people. Making Samantha unhappy was the last thing she wanted and her parents finding out she was a lesbian the first time they visited her would surely turn into a fiasco.*

*The dark-haired beauty turned, and walked down the hall that led to "Samantha's Room." She knocked on the door. It took a few minutes for Angel to answer. Opening the door only slightly and peeking out she glimpsed Alex's face. Forgetting she was clad only in a tee-shirt and underpants, Angel flung the door fully open.*

"Hi, Alex, something wrong?" Her voice faltered slightly, the sleep not out of it yet. Her heart dropped as she became almost afraid of what the answer might be. *Bet Samantha has said something to her and I'm out on my butt*, she thought as she smiled warmly at her boss.

"No, nothing wrong, I just sent Samantha off for an afternoon of sight-seeing and shopping with her family. I thought you might want some help getting started moving in today."

Angel looked at her boss, dumbfounded. "You want to spend your day off helping me move?" Her heart started racing at the thought of spending the entire afternoon with the beauty in front of her. The word *Wow!* kept repeating in her brain until she reprimanded herself -- *Keep yourself in tow, girl*, her brain warned, but the next thought started her heart galloping again -- *An entire day without the annoying blonde hanging around.*

Now it was Alex who looked perplexed. "Don't you want help?"

"Sure, but . . ." *Samantha's actually gonna let you out of her sight?* "I'd love to have your help, I just . . ."

"Listen, to tell you the truth, you were the lesser of two evils. I figured I could spend the day trying to avoid talking about work with Don Riley and trying to pretend that Samantha and I are just "friends" or I could help you get settled into your new place. Physical labor seemed like the easier of the choices."

The younger woman smiled, thinking that coming in second was just fine for now. "Give me 15 minutes to shower and dress and we'll make the first trip to the storage."

"Okay, just come on by my place when you're ready." Alex turned to walk back to the apartment.

"Alex," Angel called after her.

Alex turned back around, "Yes, Angel?"

"Thanks for the help."

"You're more than welcome, thanks for the diversion from the unsuspecting "in-laws". See ya in a bit."

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Samantha had offered to drive, but knew before the question was even out of her mouth that her father would never allow that. Feeling like she was 12 years old again, she resigned herself to the back seat next to her sister and guided her father toward the small town of Laguna Beach. She had checked the weather on the internet before they left and was glad that the day would be warm but not excessively so. The evening was also projected to have good weather for them to attend the Pageant. She instructed him to drive down the Coast Highway toward the Pottery Shack where there was a statue of Laguna's "Greeter, Eilar Larsen."

As they passed the Shack she informed everyone in the car, "Laguna had two 'Greeters', Eilar Larsen was the second and from what I can gather the most popular. He arrived in Laguna in 1938 and began greeting people at the intersection of Coast Highway and Laguna Avenue. He really had a love of people, according to the articles I've read and he spoke at least six languages. He died in 1979. I guess the people of Laguna loved him, also, because there are two 'Greeter' statues dedicated to him, one here and one in front of the Greeters Corner Restaurant."

"Looks like something a tourist trap town might erect," Don mumbled under his breath.

Samantha ignored the unwanted comment and continued delving into some of Laguna's history. She made sure to mention for her mother that John Steinbeck had written "Tortilla Flats" while living just minutes away, and that many famous Hollywood stars had maintained homes in

Laguna Beach, Judy Garland, Bette Davis and Mary Pickford being just a few of them. Because her mom was a movie buff, she promised that they would definitely drive by Bette Davis' English Tudor home that had been built in 1929 and overlooked one of Laguna's beautiful coves.

"That's why it's so expensive here, it's a magnet for Hollywood stars," her father almost spit the words, his jealousy for the rich and famous very much in his tone.

"Daddy, part of the expense comes from it being a beautiful little town nestled next to the ocean with ideal weather and a distance not too very far from two popular metropolitan cities. It's about half way between San Diego and Los Angeles." Samantha tried to get the little group back on a positive note and suddenly realized that she had been doing that almost all her life. When she lived at home her father's attitude was always taken for granted, getting away from him she had forgotten how grim and opinionated he could be.

Samantha gave a sigh of relief as the restaurant came into view. Unfortunately, it seemed as though this was going to be a long morning. She smiled as her mother commented on how quaint the building was. Sheila always seemed to find the rainbow behind each cloud and now was no exception. As usual, Alex had picked a lovely establishment with an ocean view. The food was superb and even Don could not find fault with the service. He took great pleasure in informing the waitress that they were only visitors from Washington to California and introduced each one of his "girls." The waitress smiled sweetly, took the order and went about her routine with a shake of her head, sighing to herself -- *Tourists!*

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Angel hurried her shower and dressing, anxious to get started on spending the afternoon in the presence of her new boss. She thought this would be an ideal opportunity to get to know the tall beauty better, and not in a working situation. She carefully picked out a pair of light blue running shorts and a sports bra to match that showed off her petite figure and accentuated her olive-colored skin that looked like she had a tan whether she did or not. Lately she had not gotten out in the sun much, but she planned to rectify that once she was settled in her studio so near to the beach. She looked in the mirror and when she was pleased that she looked her best, she headed toward the penthouse apartment on the other side of the building.

Alex was sitting at the dining table with the paper in one hand, a cup of tea in the other .

"Knock, knock," Angel tapped on the entrance door frame to announce her arrival. "Ready for some 'physical labor'?"

Alex looked up from the paper and put down her cup. "Come on in Angel; let me finish this article I'm reading and we can go."

Angel walked over to the table, behind Alex and leaned over to glance at the article the dark-haired woman was reading. Her breasts brushed Alex's back and she could feel her nipples responding to the touch, but Alex seemed to be unaware of the situation.



*Come on, Alex, yield to temptation, you never can tell if it will be offered again.* Angel coaxed mentally as she feigned curiosity in the story. "Interesting article?" was the sly query aimed at Alex.

"Very, it's just our little local paper, but the article was telling about all the sea life that's been helped in the past few years thanks to the Marine Mammal Center on Laguna Canyon Road." She finished reading the article and folded the paper. Angel moved out of the way so the taller woman could get up and take her cup into the kitchen.

Alex tried to ignore the fact that she had a strong feeling that Angel was making a pass at her. *Perhaps I should pay more attention to Samantha's ramblings about Angel,* Alex thought as she made her way toward the sink. *On the other hand, she could just be being friendly and trying to show some interest in what I was reading.* After rinsing her cup, she turned back toward Angel who was staring out the window. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Alex asked.

"I'll say! You really have a little slice of Heaven here, Alex. How did you come to pick Laguna."

"That's a long story, I'll tell you about it on the way to the storage. We only have until about 5:30 before Samantha will be bringing the gang back and you know how time flies when you're having fun." She looked over at the younger woman and hoped that the reference to "time and fun" had been taken as a joke. *Oh, I Do think that maybe I made the wrong choice,* was the next thought running through her head; *maybe I should have gone with Samantha and put up with good ole Don all day.*

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After breakfast Samantha had her dad drive to the corner of Forest and Park Avenues to begin their tour before shopping. Sally read the inscription on the gate that had been built in 1935, "This gate hangs well and hinders none, refresh and rest, then travel on."

"How sweet," Sheila interjected looking back at her daughters.

"It's just a saccharine saying to keep the tourists coming," Don retorted, putting his special damper on the day right from the start.

Samantha didn't want to argue with her father, so she ignored the comment and pointed further down the street.

She wanted to show off the beaches and marine life because she knew Sally would be interested in that aspect of life in Laguna. They drove past a few of the more popular beaches and coves, including a beach designated especially for pets. Samantha informed her little group that the entire coastline along Laguna had been declared a refuge for marine life. She told Sally that she would have to come down and spend some time when they could go exploring the tide pools, do some snorkeling, and watch the otters and seals at play. They also passed by the Friends of the Sea Lion Marine Mammal Center which she promised to take Sally to on a return trip. Every time she mentioned Sally visiting, she would get a glare from her father in the rearview mirror.

She became a little concerned at his constant grimacing, but tried to keep her voice in a happy tone so as not to upset her mom. Of course the interaction never did get past the watchful eyes of her little sis.

Samantha had done her homework and tried to take them to places that each of them would enjoy. They passed by the Catholic church, St. Francis By-The-Sea which had been built in 1933 after the Long Beach earthquake, because her dad had always been interested in architecture. She also made sure they drove past the oldest house in Laguna, knowing that her dad would appreciate the unusual materials that the house had been built with. He slowed down as he came upon the home and Samantha informed him that it had been built in 1883 with wood that had floated in from shipwrecks and driftwood. It was the first time since they had started touring that Don actually acted involved and impressed in what they were viewing. Up to this point it was like he was trying to find fault with the small beach town. He seemed angry with the magic of Laguna that had lured his daughter away from home, and he was beginning to feel that now he had no control over her.

Time was beginning to run a little short so Samantha brought the touring part of the day to an end as she directed her dad to Peppertree Lane for some shopping in the unique boutiques. On the way they passed by the 40 foot mural on Forest Lane entitled, "A Window from the Mountains to the Sea." Sally and Sheila thought it was absolutely beautiful, but Don's only comment was that he couldn't see the difference between something like that painted on a wall and the graffiti "art" in the inner cities. Samantha simply shook her head and kept him traveling in the direction of the shops. She resigned herself to the fact that keeping his interest on an upbeat was simply too much to ask.

Her mother thoroughly enjoyed the shopping and picked up a few gifts for her friends back home. She was saving the majority of her pocket-money to purchase something at the Festival of Arts on Sunday. She mentioned to Samantha that she was excited about the upcoming Pageant and her daughter gave her a brief history of the event while they shopped. She explained to her mom that the first performance was given to a small audience in 1932 and that today it had grown so popular that over 200,000 were expected to attend performances this year.

On the way home she spoke of her first experience with grunions, and how Alex had explained everything to her. She had Sally in stitches laughing when she described how difficult it was to capture the tiny creatures as they squirmed back toward the ocean. Her mother said it all sounded so very romantic, the description of the moon with the small silver fish lining the shoreline and the stars shining down. Samantha quickly changed the subject as she felt she was lending too much atmosphere to her story and would be giving herself away if she kept on.

"You seem to spend a lot of time with Alex," her father remarked as they turned off the highway toward the warehouse. "Doesn't she have any other friends, or perhaps a male friend? And, by the way, don't you?"

Samantha could feel her face begin to redden. Sally placed a hand on her knee and squeezed it for moral support. Samantha took a large breath and once again found herself explaining her actions to her father. "I've only met a few people since I've been here, dad. There's Suz and her

boyfriend, the lady I used to work for, and Alex. I expect I'll meet a lot more when the center opens for business. As for Alex's personal affairs, if you want to know more, why don't you ask her yourself?" She knew that was the wrong thing to say. It sounded insolent and she half expected to hear the old adage, 'don't make me stop this car and take care of you, young lady'. Secondly, she didn't really want her father asking Alex a bunch of personal questions. She knew her lover was not big on lying and she might just decide to answer him honestly.

She was fuming inside, but was going to leave her answer at that. As they pulled over in front of the building, she couldn't help adding, "Alex and I seem to have a lot in common, Dad. I enjoy being with her." *There*, she thought to herself, *take that any way you want to you opinionated bigot!* Contrary to what was running through her head, she smiled sweetly up into the eyes staring at her in the rear-view mirror.

They had almost three hours before they had to leave for the show. She knew her dad would probably want to take a nap and it wouldn't hurt her mom to join him so they would both be refreshed for the evening's entertainment. She made mention of that to them and for the first time during the fated visit got a positive reaction from each of them at the same time.

Sally said she wanted to take a short walk along the beach before getting ready.

Samantha was hoping that Alex would already be back from helping Angel. She really needed a hug, a kiss and a kind word. Reviewing the morning and afternoon in her mind, she felt that it had been fairly successful and fun with only a few low points, but she now remembered why she had left home and was glad the physical distance between her and her father was as great as it was. Her only regret was not being close enough to see her mom or sister as often as she would like.

Sheila made mention at how beautiful the stained glass doors were as they approached the building, and Samantha agreed that they were the most unusual doors she had ever seen.

Samantha used the buzzer first, expecting the soft contralto voice she loved to come swiftly to her ears, but disappointment soon set in when silence ensued.

"Looks like your friends must be having a good time moving," Sheila interjected as only she could, giving Samantha an immediate pain in her chest.

She smiled over her shoulder at her mother, "Yeah, but I imagine they'll be along any minute now. Alex has to get ready for tonight just like we do."

"Well, dear, it's still early. I'm sure she'll be here before eight," her mother smiled at her first born.

"Okay, okay, enough chatter," Don grumbled, getting tired of standing in front of a locked door. "It's obvious there's no one here to answer the door. You do have keys don't you, Samantha?"

"Yes, Daddy." Samantha turned her attention back to the doors. Opening them she let everyone into the building. Her heart ached a little as she had been ready for that beautiful smile, the one that could turn a gloomy day into a brilliant one in a second.

Samantha told her sister that she would leave the doors open and suggested that after her walk and when she was ready, that she go ahead and use the bathroom down the hall from "her" bedroom. That way they wouldn't be all vying for the shower at the same time.

As Sally headed off in the direction of the stairs that lead to the ocean Sam turned back to her parents and motioned them toward the elevator. When exiting the lift, she reiterated that curtain time was 8:30 and that they wanted to leave by 8 o'clock.

"We'll be by to get all of you sometime around 7:45. Have a good nap." She started down the hall toward the apartment but turned and walked back to where her parents were standing. "I had a wonderful time today," she said as sincerely as she could muster. Watching a smile appear on her mother's face she added, "I hope you did, too." She hugged her mother tightly and whispered in her ear, "I'm glad your plans got changed and everyone was able to come down here earlier. I've missed you, mom." She kissed her mother and noticed tears welling up in the tender green eyes that had always tried to understand her. "I love you," she murmured as she wiped away a tear from her mother's cheek.

"We love you, too, Samantha," her mother answered.

"Come on, Sheila," Don interrupted, "We'll see you in a couple hours, Sam."

Samantha watched as her parents walked toward the guest suite then turned and headed to the apartment.

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It had taken about an hour to get the first load of Angel's stuff packed into the trailer and on its way to a new home. Most of the young woman's things were manageable by a single person, only a few objects took two people to lift or carry. Angel had rented one of the small local U-Haul's just for the day and it looked as though two or three trips would be all they needed. While they were packing the trailer, Alex noticed that more than once Angel's hand had brushed hers in the process of exchange. At first she thought nothing of it since there was bound to be some physical contact when they were loading and unloading things, but the younger woman's hand always seemed to take more time than necessary to go its own way after the contact was made. She also caught Angel staring at her a couple of times during the day and by the end of the afternoon, she knew without a doubt that Samantha had been right all along to not trust Angel. But Alex also knew that Samantha had been wrong in feeling that Alex might also not be trustworthy. Angel was an intelligent, attractive, goal-oriented woman, but if she was as smart as Alex believed her to be, she would stop trying to entice her new boss in an impossible direction and be happy being just friends.

They stopped for lunch around 2:00 and Alex made sure that her main topic of conversation over a pizza and beer was her lover and how much Samantha meant to her. She figured if she laid all her cards on the table from the beginning, they would have no problems, no game playing, and would be able to work together and perhaps even be social friends.

Halfway through lunch Angel knew she needed to revamp her game plan if she was to get close to Alex. She figured she would bide her time and become close to both of them before setting a new strategy for getting even closer to the tall, blue-eyed beauty now sitting across from her.

Taking the time out for something to eat put them a little behind, not that Angel minded at all, and they were later than Alex had anticipated in getting the trailer back to the storage place. It was 5:45 before they pulled the Mustang back onto Alternative Paradise Road and Alex was hoping, up until she saw the rental vehicle at the curb, that Samantha had, likewise, been late returning to their home.

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On and off during the day, Cassie had tuned into the on goings at the warehouse on the cliff by both listening in on the microphone and occasionally looking through her spyglass. She was curious to hear what Samantha and Alex had in store for the weekend with Samantha's folks. She had turned the microphone on early and was rewarded by hearing the family leave sans Alex on a day excursion into Laguna for some tourist-type shopping and sight seeing. By listening throughout the week she had caught them once or twice talking about going to the Pageant of the Masters and then topping the weekend off with a trip to the Art Festival on Sunday. Cassie opened another beer and smiled in the direction of Alternative Paradise, she hadn't felt this joyous in months. She was extremely happy that Samantha's family had come south for this little visit.

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Trying to keep a positive outlook all afternoon while dealing with her father had mentally exhausted Samantha. After having had practically no sleep last night, walking all over Laguna while shopping had fatigued her physically. She decided that she would take her own advice and lie down for a power nap before having to shower and dress for this evening's festivities. She felt that part of her exhaustion also came from the fact that Alex was not home yet and try as she might, she was having a difficult time feeling happy about that. She trusted Alex, but Angel was a real cutie and temptation wasn't beyond anyone. On her way to the bedroom she glanced out at the ocean, stopping a minute to watch the waves ebb and flow. "I know you're a jealous lover," she directed at the sea, "I've watched as you deposit and retrieve. I guess I feel a lot like you, I don't mind letting Alex out into the world without me for small bits of time, but I want her to return when I need her."

She continued into the bedroom, carrying a bag containing two dream pillows she had purchased this afternoon, one for Alex and one for herself. Having the lavender-scented pouch over her eyes would surely induce sleep and keep the late afternoon sun from disturbing her as she

napped. She stripped down to just her panties and flopped on the bed. Grabbing Alex's pillow and hugging it close to her she inhaled the fragrance that was left behind long after her lover had relinquished the sleeping cushion. Obsession -- what a perfect perfume for Alex to have chosen; it certainly was what Samantha had become, obsessed with the woman of her dreams. She placed one of the dream pillows on her eyes as she snuggled with Alex's sleeping pillow. Within a short period of time she was fast asleep.

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The front door was locked and Alex decided against buzzing Samantha. She thought perhaps it might be nice to surprise her. The day proved to be more of a workout than Alex had been used to in weeks. Helping Angel move and arrange everything had given her the well-known feeling of invigoration from the exercise. During the day she had made a promise to herself to get back into some kind of exercise routine beginning on Monday. They stepped inside the building and Angel thanked Alex again for her help. She mentioned to Alex that she could sleep at the studio starting tonight if they wanted to use the guest room for Samantha's sister. Alex told her she didn't care one way or the other, after all they would only be here this one night. She was welcome to stay the rest of the weekend or she could get what little she had left upstairs and christen her new home this evening. She did mention that it would be nice to have the warehouse to themselves once Samantha's folks left on Sunday afternoon. Angel smiled and nodded, getting the hint. She changed the subject by asking if she could use the pool and received an affirmative answer.

"Have fun, Angel. I've got to get upstairs."

"You sure you don't want to take a swim first?"

"No, I know Samantha's probably getting worried as to why I wasn't here when she got home."

"Wow!" Angel's eyes widened to think this larger-than-life woman was so easily controlled.

"Wish I could find someone I could wrap around my finger the way Sam has you wrapped," she smiled, rolling her eyes then looking into sky blue eyes that were beginning to ice over.

"I'm not "wrapped" around anyone's finger, I just want to go see Samantha. She's been gone all day and I missed her." The tone of her voice had also taken on a coldness and Angel, once again, mentally kicked herself for the inappropriate statement.

"I'm sorry, Alex . . . I was only kidding. I guess my sense of humor isn't the same as yours." She gave a small smile of innocence.

The ice faded from the Alex's eyes and from her voice, "I'm sorry, too, Angel, I think I'm just a little tired. I'm hoping to take a short nap before having to entertain the group tonight." She threw a small smile in the direction of the younger woman. "You going up to get your suit?"

"Yeah, don't want to tempt the painted fish with a naked beauty," she grinned up at Alex as she stepped into the elevator.

They parted company when the lift reached the top floor.

Alex found the apartment quiet and still. Rather than yell out that she was home, she figured it might be fun to surprise Samantha. Looking around she noticed that the kitchen was deserted as were the living and recreation rooms. Making her way to the bedroom door she spotted her lover curled into a tight ball on their bed, clinging to Alex's pillow. She didn't want to awaken the beauty but felt compelled to join her.

Quickly running back through the rooms to the entrance, she shut and locked the door. *No need for any unnecessary surprises*, she thought to herself, then ran back to the bedroom.

She desperately needed a shower, but didn't want to wait any longer before feeling the softness of her lover's skin against her own. Quickly she stripped out of clothes that had been soaked with sweat more than once during the long afternoon. She smelled her armpits and changed her mind about the shower. Had she been running a race, she most definitely would have won, as it soon became the quickest shower in her history. Just as quickly she dried off and splashed on some after bath Obsession. Carefully she climbed into the bed next to Samantha.

At first she just lay there propped on one elbow watching the rhythmic movement of the small blonde's chest as she breathed. When she could stand it no longer she gently caressed the face she loved then bent over to place a kiss on the full lips.

Without opening her eyes, Samantha responded to the affection being lavished upon her. "Um, you smell great," she whispered. "I missed you today."

"Me, too, you," came the desired counter.

Alex pulled the smaller woman closer and felt her own skin ripple as Samantha breasts responded to the tactile luxury of being next to Alex's skin.

"By the Gods, I love you Alexis Dorian," Samantha continued as she wrapped herself around the tall beauty. "I want to be lost in your embrace forever." She passionately kissed the woman she had just moments ago been dreaming of.

Suddenly, Samantha pushed away from Alex and started to get up from the bed. "The door, if my parents . . ."

"Honey, don't worry," Alex grabbed her and brought her back down to a lying position. "I locked the door before coming in here, I'm not an idiot you know?" She laughed at her lover and began showering her with small kisses all over her face and neck. "I want to devour you -- slowly." She glanced quickly at the clock on the bedside table. "I have plenty of time." She raised her left eyebrow and gave Samantha a crooked grin. "Do you want to be devoured, my Destiny?"

"There is nothing I want more in the world but to be 'devoured' by you," came the immediate answer as the smaller woman was enveloped by two strong arms.

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Following making love the two women fell asleep for a short period of time, being awoken by an invisible inner time piece that allowed them less than an hour to shower and dress. But they both completed the exercise with even a little time to spare. They arrived at the guest suite precisely at 7:45 as Samantha had proclaimed they would.

Sally met them at the door with a "thank God you're here" grin. Everyone was dressed and ready to go. Sheila seemed to be the most excited about seeing the living art. Don was rambling on about all the Rockwell paintings that were going to be acted out, showing more interest than he had in anything else so far and Sally was just happy that someone other than her parents were finally in the room.

With the three girls in the back seat and Don driving the group was finally on their way to view the spectacle the Riley clan had traveled so many miles to see. Alex was sure they would not be disappointed, she had yet to see anyone come away from the Pageant unimpressed or feeling like they had not been thoroughly and pleasantly entertained.

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As they approached the ticket booths, it was Samantha's turn to remind everyone to keep their stubs so they could all get into the Festival of Arts free in the morning. The crowd was large but very well-mannered and it didn't take long to find the excellent seats that Alex had purchased for viewing tonight's event.

Don was impressed with the seating arrangements and when Sheila whispered in his ear that the tickets had cost \$50 a piece, he almost swallowed whole the peppermint his wife had just given him. He found himself wishing that Alex had been what her name inferred, a man. If that had been the case then he would at least be able to stop worrying about one of his girls having a successful marriage. He vowed that when he got home he would do some detective work on this Alex and find out exactly where she got all her money. Then realizing he didn't even know her last name he made that a priority. He planned on talking to her tomorrow, very casually while they were walking around, he was sure he'd be able to get her aside long enough to pump her for a few statistics. Sheila poked him in the ribs as the orchestra struck the beginning notes of the overture, bringing him quickly back to the 'here and now'.

The evening went smoothly and was an entertainment success. Each of the Riley's found something to rave about; even Don was impressed with the caliber of the performance. He, like Ray had, especially liked the "Great War" segment of the show, and all the Rockwell displays. Sheila was enthralled with most everything and refused to be pinpointed to a favorite. Samantha kept telling Sally bits and pieces of her chosen selections, the "Rock Legends" recreations during the intermission. Just like a little sis, she refused to agree with Samantha, feeling that the high point of the evening was when they showed the work in progress.

Alex felt relieved that everyone seemed to be having a good time and that Don had managed not to spend most of the night talking business. They dined at a small restaurant tucked away in the



Laguna Hills with yet another breathtaking view of the ocean. Sheila asked Alex how she found all these quaint little places. Alex answered simply that most of the restaurants up and down the coast line ended up having fair-to-marvelous views of the ocean, so finding a restaurant with ambience in the area was really not that difficult. The moon and stars were cooperating with the gals in helping to produce a beautiful evening by shining ever so brightly and cascading their light down onto the water. Had it not been for her parents sitting between them, it would have been a very romantic setting.

Alex felt slightly uncomfortable knowing that Sally was aware of her relationship with Samantha but hid her emotions about it very well as she avoided eye contact with Sam's sister. Somewhere during the course of the evening Sheila asked Alex what her name was short for, and Alex quickly articulated some line of gibberish from the previous conversation, totally avoiding answering the question and did her damndest to change the subject.

It was well after midnight when the little troupe returned to the warehouse on the cliff. Everyone had experienced a great evening and they were looking forward to the Festival of Arts in the morning. Sheila, after having more than enough wine became slightly sad, vocalizing that Sunday evening would, again, find her abandoning her oldest child in a strange state, far from home. Samantha assured her that she would be just fine in California. She promised at least a biweekly phone call and a visit whenever possible.

They said their good-nights as they came off the elevator, having had a nightcap at the restaurant before leaving. Most everyone was tired and each for different reasons. Don blamed his on being old and Sheila's being tired on too much fermented grape juice. Alex commented that she had done more exercise today than she had in weeks, even though she had no intentions of going to sleep as soon as her body hit the bed. Sally, on the other hand, suggested having a pajama party and staying up all morning talking. The idea was immediately squelched by her father who insisted that everyone get some shut eye so there would be no cranks in the morning.

Sheila had suggested making breakfast at home before going off to the Festival, but Alex explained that there was food available at the all-day event and that they might want to sample some of the fare there. Not wanting to offend the hostess, she agreed and Don said he didn't care one way or the other. Sally, of course, was always ready to try new things so she wanted to eat out. It was finally settled that Alex and Samantha would once again come and get the rest of the clan somewhere around 10 Sunday morning.

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The sun was just beginning to rise over the hills and faint streaks of light began finding their way into the bedroom when Samantha let out a whimper that awakened Alex. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes she looked down at the fair-haired woman curled up in the crook of her arm. Samantha wore a frown and there were tears streaming down her face, yet she was obviously still sound asleep.

"Samantha, honey, what's wrong?" Alex wanted to know, gently shaking her lover. "Samantha, why are you crying?"

No longer asleep, she opened her tear-filled eyes and looked up into a face filled with concern. "My dream . . ." Samantha began between sobs . . . "it was horrid. The problem is that sometimes my dreams come true." There was no trace of a smile on the usually gleeful face.

"So . . . tell me about it."

"It was horrible. My father found out about us and he hated you and he hated me, too!" Even though she knew it was only a dream, the reality of the situation was more than she could bear. "Oh, Alex," she cried. "Sometimes my dreams come true. I pray this is not one of those times." She threw her arms around Alex and buried her face in the soft, warm flesh of her lover's breasts, the remnants of the nightmare still fresh in her mind's eye.

"Honey, it was only a dream," Alex soothed as she stroked the flaxen hair. "Come on we only have to make it through today to pull off our little charade. The hard part's over. I think your parents like me well enough . . . as your 'friend' that is." She tilted up Samantha's face and smiled as the sobbing woman in her arms worked at regaining her composure. "Okay, my Destiny. No more sorrow. Today is a new day and we have a brand new slate to use. Don't you think it would be better to start off smiling? You're the one who's supposed to keep me focused on the positive," she tenderly smiled down into the moist green eyes, slowly lowering her face to meet her lover's. First she kissed away the tears that had flowed onto now moist cheeks and then softly planted a kiss on her lover's lips. The gentle gesture became passionate as Samantha returned the kiss with one of her own.

Minutes passed, tears dried and Alex broke off the embrace with the suggestion of a bubble bath to get the day rolling. It was still early and Alex pointed out that they had plenty of time before having to go get the visitors. Samantha was a more than willing participant as they headed for the bath. Warm liquid topped with soapy bubbles of every hue allowed thoughts of nightmares to become distant. Relaxation was easily achieved and the smile that lit Alex's days soon returned to her lover's lips.

As they sat in the warmth the temptation became too great to resist. At first Samantha just nestled close to Alex's back, strong arms holding her tightly, but when kisses beginning at the top of her crown began finding their way down her neck, when a familiar tongue slowly wound its way around her ear, the position soon changed from front-to-back to front-to-front. Alex drew her up close as Samantha wrapped her legs around her lover's waist. Not even the bubbles could survive the lack of distance between their two bodies.

Alex had said they had plenty of time before needing to get dressed and they certainly intended to make good use of the hourglass that was quickly emptying. Fiery kisses continued as long fingers explored known territory. Interjacent to moans of pleasure Samantha suggested they move to a more conducive environment. Alex agreed as she began to rise from her position in the churning water, lifting Samantha along with her. Barely drying with the one towel Sam had

grabbed upon passing the towel rack, they reached the bed still glistening with the rainbow bubbles that had clung to their bodies as they made their exit from the water.

The ritual of love continued, losing them in a world of their own making, oblivious to the external environment of the real world. Nightmares and problems were forgotten upon the path to ecstasy.

Alex held Samantha tighter and closer when she began to feel the involuntary pulsating and counter tightening in the inner-sanctum of her beloved. The movements continued repeating themselves and she smiled at the knowledge that she could elicit such satisfaction in the woman she loved. Samantha let go of the pillow she had been squeezing to place her arms around Alex and draw her ever closer.

"I don't want to ever move," came the soft whisper from the small blonde. "Your arms are all the world I need."

Alex kissed her on the forehead, "Samantha, as much as I hate to say this, we need to get up and get dressed." The spell had been broken and the two lovers were back into the present and the realization that guests were merely yards away. They left the comfort of each other's arms and began the ritual of dressing.

By 9:45 the gals were ready to leave when Samantha's belly began making rude grumbling sounds that indicated it was time to feed. "Alex I don't know if I can wait until we get to the Festival. I'm starving," the small blonde whined.

"You'll survive another half hour. Come on, let's go get your folks a little early."

As luck would have it everyone was ready to go and just as ready to have breakfast as Sam was. "It must be a 'Riley' thing," Alex grinned when she heard the rumblings of more than one stomach in the elevator en route to the first floor.

Once again Don was behind the wheel, after all there was just no room for five in either the VW or the Porsche. Alex made a mental note to eventually add a 'family' car or van to their collection for occasions such as these and for vacation trips when they might want to take their time and go by ground. She had always wanted one of those totally equipped vans with the TV, VCR and all the amenities but had never had a reason to purchase one before, now she did. She scooted up from between the two sisters and placed her elbows on the back of the front seat to better give directions to the Fair Grounds.

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Cassie had gotten up early and turned her sound equipment on. She wanted to hear when the little family on the cliff left for their field day. Not being disappointed, sounds began clattering through the microphone close to 10 o'clock, creaks from the opening of the elevator doors were heard first, followed by the happy chatter of the unsuspecting little troupe. She had been ready to leave for over an hour now and was filled with anticipation. Eavesdropping definitely had it's

advantages; Cassandra heard that they were going directly to the Festival from the warehouse. She turned off the mic and headed for her car. *A family outing; how sweet*, she thought to herself. She planned on playing observer today as she studied the interaction between her prey and "the little family." Getting to the fair grounds ahead of the entourage would be no problem; she lived closer.

Amongst all the patrons already parading through, an inconspicuous spot was not difficult to find. Cassie squatted behind a tree and watched the stream of patrons begin. Shuttles made continuous stops, unloading people eager to begin the Festival of Arts experience. Later on in the afternoon the shuttles would be filled with people and packages going both to and from the grounds, but at this hour everyone was just beginning to arrive. Before long her quarry came into sight.

Not coming as any surprise to Cassie, Alex stood out in the crowd, making her easy to spot. The combination of height and beauty set her apart in any gathering. People had a tendency to turn and stare at the ebony-haired siren as she walked, head above most, through the horde with her own little group close around her.

Cassandra waited until they had all entered the grounds before getting up and following, constantly keeping a pace behind the small troupe. For the first time in months she actually had a feeling of joy. The sun was shining and the air smelled sweet, after all retribution was in the wind.

She watched as they went almost directly to one of the food exhibits and sat around listening to music while they ate. She wished they would hurry as she was tired of standing in one place. It wasn't long before her wish was answered and the little caravan took off again walking from booth to booth with Samantha walking mostly with her mom as the sister seemed to gravitate toward Alex and the father was seemingly bored with most everything. When something occasionally caught his eye, he would wander off by himself, hardly missed by the rest of the family.

Impatience began setting in again as the tribe of Riley's and Alex stopped at every booth, every artisan, and every musical group along the way. Almost two hours had passed; Cassandra was a person of action and boredom was beginning to set in. At one point, when Samantha and her mother were inquiring into taking a lesson at one of the crafting tents, Cassie decided to make her day a little more interesting and ventured close enough to listen in to the conversation being held between Alex, the father and the sister. After all, no one except Samantha had ever seen her. She strolled up beside the trio and nonchalantly eavesdropped, something she had become an expert at doing over the past month.

"I don't know about you, Alex," Sally began, "but I'm getting parched."

"I could use something to drink, and I think your mom and sister will be occupied for quite while fooling around with that clay. Why don't we go find a booth selling lemonade or ice tea?" Alex quickly answered, hoping to keep from being alone with Don for any length of time. He kept looking at her like he wanted to ask something, but every time he started one of the women

would interrupt. She did not want to discuss business with the man today and avoidance seemed the best policy.

"Don, why don't you stick around here just in case the ladies get finished before we come back with the drinks." Alex suggested. "I think we passed a booth a little bit back, but the lines looked pretty long. I don't want Samantha and Sheila coming out and finding no one around."

"Sure, I've got nothing better to do. I'll look into a few of the exhibits up here and keep an eye out for them." He reached into his pocket for money.

"No. Drinks are on me," Alex quickly waved his hand back. "We'll be as fast as the line will allow."

The two women took off in the direction they had just come from. Alex knew she would probably have questions from Sally, but at least they would be ones she could answer honestly. Besides it might be nice getting to know Samantha's little sis better, she might even get to ask some questions herself, ones about Samantha and what she was like growing up.

Alex accidentally bumped into a woman when she tried to avoid a hole in the path. She smiled and excused herself, looking directly into large doe-brown eyes and a smile that would melt butter. "I'm terribly sorry, I was trying to avoid a hole and didn't see you."

"No problem, I wasn't watching where I was going either," Cassie confessed. "I was busy looking at the oil paintings."

The two women continued walking their separate ways. Alex and Sally headed in one direction, and Cassie in the other, a predatory grin upon her face. The tall blonde glanced back to make sure Alex was still heading toward a drink concession. Quite satisfied that Alex would be not around to interfere, she quickened her pace and shortened the distance between herself and her target.

She glanced into the tent where Samantha and Sheila were experimenting with pottery clay and then stepped closer to the distinguished looking man she knew to be Samantha's father. She watched him as he paced around in front of the tent. When he got totally bored he would venture off to an adjacent booth, look around and finally retreat back to where he began, making sure all was going well inside the tent. After he had done this several times, Cassie put on her friendliest facade and walked over to the solitary man.

"Hi, you must be Samantha's father." Cassie held out her hand in a gesture of goodwill. "I've been trying to catch up to all of you since that booth with the velvet paintings, but I kept getting sidetracked. I knew you were coming in this weekend for the Pageant and was hoping I might get a chance to meet you."

Taken back by the forwardness of this strange woman, Don responded to her outstretched hand with his own. "Why, yes. I'm Don Riley, Samantha's dad . . . and you are?"

"I'm sorry. I'm Cassandra, Alex's friend . . . well . . . I used to be just Alex's friend, but I guess now I'm Alex and Samantha's friend. Isn't it marvelous the two of them getting together as quickly as they did? I guess true love is timeless. It must have been 'love at first sight', as the saying goes."

She watched as the man's green eyes began to turn into small slits, his face reddening.

"Excuse me, are we talking about the same two people?" Don asked incredulously.

"Alexis Dorian, the owner of Alternative Paradise and Samantha Riley, right?"

"Dorian, did you say ALEXIS DORIAN?" He practically roared at the slim blonde standing in front of him visions and past situations swimming around in his mind. *No wonder she never mentioned her last name. It's that dyke bitch from Have It All. No! This can't be happening to me. This woman has got to be mistaken.* But he knew in his heart that she wasn't. Thoughts sped around in his brain. He had never seen the bitch who continued to take account after account away from some of his most competent salespeople. Everyone had said she was beautiful, but they all described her with long ebony hair, not a short 'dyke' cut, and the eyes . . . he mentally kicked himself for not thinking about the height, the hair, the gorgeous eyes, and the money. Of course she had money, that bitch came from money and raked in more being the cutthroat negotiator, working for Marge Silkton. And now his daughter was . . . he didn't even want to think about it.

Cassie stood there a look of surprise on her innocent face, hiding the hideous smile in her heart as she brought the world down upon the Riley clan with a few short sentences. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I've spoken out of turn. I know how "out" Alex is and I just assumed that Samantha was, too. Oh . . . dear," She placed her hands up to her face feigning despair and hiding delight. "They'll never forgive me. Please, try to forget what I just said . . . um . . . maybe I heard wrong through the grapevine. Maybe it isn't your Samantha who is Alex's new lover . . . maybe it was another Samantha . . . I'm really sorry . . . Gotta go."

With that she took off running in the direction opposite of where Alex had just gone, leaving Don standing in the middle of the path with his Irish definitely showing. With his fists clenched, teeth grinding, face red and slits for eyes he approached the tent where Samantha and her mother were almost finished with their lesson. The roar of a wounded beast filled the canvassed area.

"Sheila Riley, out here, NOW!" He stood fuming just to the left of the entrance waiting for his wife to appear.

Sheila and Samantha both immediately ceased what they were doing and ran out of the tent toward the visibly distressed man.

"Don, what's the matter," Sheila gasped seeing the condition of her husband. Her mind quickly went to disaster. "Something terrible has happened to Sally!? Oh, Don. Did something happen to Sally?"

"Shut up and listen," was all the man uttered as he looked beyond his wife standing in front of him, nearly in tears, and glared into the eyes of his first born.

"You!" He spat vehemently at Samantha.

She cringed at the furiousness of his words and the appearance of his face. "Me?" she asked innocently, looking around to see if there could have been some mistake and her father was really addressing some stranger who had done something horrible to him.

"Tell me, Samantha, are you . . ." the word seemed to stick in his throat, ". . . Queer?" He straightened full height, scowling at her.

Samantha looked from her father to her mother, who stood to the side with her mouth agape. She swallowed hard and tried to think how to soften the blow. "Where are Alex and Sally?" were the only words that came out of her mouth.

"Don't worry about them -- answer my question!"

"Daddy, I . . ."

"Samantha, answer my question!" he roared again.

By now a crowd was beginning to slow and stare. Samantha was feeling extremely self-conscious and more than a little scared. She looked around hoping to find Alex, her hero, coming to her rescue, but all she saw was a throng of strangers staring at her family as they aired their internal affairs. *Alex*, she thought to herself, *where are you? I need you. You promised you would go through this with me.* Her throat was tightening up and her mouth was so dry her tongue was sticking to the roof of it when she opened her mouth to speak.

"Your mother and I are waiting, Samantha Reneé."

Taking a deep breath she began, "That's not exactly the word I would use, Daddy, but to answer your question . . . um . . ." staring at the ground, she inhaled deeply and slowly emptied her lungs as she almost whispered, "I'm in love with Alex."

"Do you know who that Bitch is who lured you into this life of vile abomination?" he screamed at her.

Her eyes met his and surprisingly there was not a trace of fear in the emerald orbs that glared at her father. "She's not a bitch and we are not abominations." To her own surprise she had found her voice. Something strong and protective was born within her when she heard the woman she loved being called a bitch and the sacredness of their love an abomination. "Daddy, if you would just come out of the dark ages . . ."

She was stopped suddenly by the jolt of a hand swiftly and powerfully striking her on the cheek. Reeling from the force of the slap to her face, Samantha fought to keep herself composed. Her

eyes teared as she dared to look up into the face of her father who now resembled a wicked stranger more than the man who raised her and who she loved. Judging from the pain she was feeling, she imagined that she would wear the mark of his hand for quite a few days to come.

Tear-filled emerald eyes, looking into those of the same hue, could not believe the hate she saw in eyes that once had shown her only love. Her hand went to her face; the taste of blood in her mouth made her want to vomit. Never in her entire life had her father ever hit that hard. She had seen him hit her mother occasionally when she was younger and had wondered when she got older why her mom allowed him to treat her like that. But . . . until today he had never hit her in the face. His punishment for Samantha was usually making her feel guilty. But she refused to feel guilty about Alex and the way she loved her.

"From this day on I have but one daughter and if you know what's good for you, you'll leave my presence immediately."

With a saddened heart, a sore face, and a broken spirit, Samantha hastily turned to her mother for the support she knew the woman would be unable to give her. She started to speak, tears streaming down her cheeks, thought better of it, and ran off in the direction of the shuttle stop.

"Don," Sheila started as she watched her first born running away from them, perhaps never to see them again. "What happened? Where did you come up with that accusation?"

"I'll tell you later, Sheila. Right now we need to find Sally and get the hell out of this perverted state."

"But Don, are you going to just let Samantha . . ."

"Don't," he turned and glared at his wife, "Do not ever mention her name again in my presence!"

"But Don . . ."

Grabbing Sheila by the shoulders he shook her, "I said Do Not talk about her in my presence ever again! Is that clear, Sheila?"

With fear in her voice she swallowed her objections, "Yes, Don," was all she could muster.

"Good! Let's find Sally." He turned and began quickly walking in the direction the two young women had taken somewhere close to 15 minutes ago, thinking that surely they would be headed back this way by now. He shook his head, unable to believe how his family had disintegrated in the span of a few short minutes. "God Damn Fucking Dyke!" he murmured under his breath as he stomped off ahead of his wife searching for his youngest child.

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Alex and Sally were wading through the thick crowd, drinks in hand when Alex spotted Don Riley coming toward them. He was sporting a scowl as he pushed his way through the crowd



with a fierceness that lent Alex to believe something disastrous had just happened. She spotted Sheila close on his heels, tears streaming down her face. Try as she could, she could not spot Samantha anywhere.

Alex deposited the drinks in the nearest trash bin, as she quickened her pace and headed toward the angry man. Sally was not tall enough to see beyond in front of her and could not grasp the meaning of Alex's actions. She tried desperately to keep up with the long strides of her companion, but they continued getting longer and quicker, and the smaller woman found herself falling behind.

"Don," Alex queried as she approached the angry man, "What's the matter?"

"Don't you even talk to me you God Damn Dyke. Your kind is constantly on the prowl for new meat to bring into your vile little circle aren't you!"

Alex caught her breath as she tried to absorb the entirety of his accusations. "Can you calm down long enough to tell me where Samantha is?" She looked over at Sheila who lowered her head so as not to meet the inquisitive blue eyes.

She reached out to touch Sheila's hand, only to have Don swing at her arm, which she quickly maneuvered out of harm's way before impact. "Don't even think of going there, Don!" Alex glared at the out-of-control monster standing next to her. "You don't know who you're fooling with if you start with me!"

"Then keep your fucking hands to yourself and off my wife. If it wasn't for the fact that we have luggage at that den of inequity you call home, I wouldn't even be speaking to you."

"What happened? Illuminate me! Where the Hell is Samantha?" She screamed trying to keep control while every fiber of her being was crying out for some sense to be made out of this uncontrollable scene.

"Some queer friend of yours told me all about the two of you. I don't give a Fuck where your Bitch is -- gone to Hell for all I care. We need to get our stuff and get out of this God Damn Queer Loving State," he fumed.

At this point Sheila was almost beyond control, sobbing into her youngest daughter's shoulder as her life unraveled before her very eyes. Sally tried to console her mother and thought about attempting to calm her father down, but think about it was all she did. Twenty-four years of experience told her not to interfere just yet.

Alex tried to assimilate everything quickly so she could start to piece the entire scene into something she could deal with and recognize. Someone had "outed" them. Someone who obviously wanted to cause havoc. Her mind sped, names racing across her consciousness to all the people who knew she and Samantha were a couple. Of all the people who knew, only one would benefit from a disaster such as this, and that would only be for a twisted sort of revenge . . . Nikki -- *NO!* She told herself, thinking back to the night she accused her ex-lover of stalking

Samantha. *It has to be that stranger, that blonde who had been following Samantha.* Alex convinced herself that the culprit had to be that woman, the one who was still nameless to them. It was beyond understanding why a stranger would want their lives torn into shreds and scattered for the entire city to behold, but it was a conundrum Alex did not have time to work on right now.

She composed herself as best she could and tried to take charge of the situation instead of becoming a victim. "Okay -- so you know I'm a lesbian . . ."

"You Bitch, if you had told me your last name when we first met instead of playing this insidious game of yours, I would have known immediately and would have taken my family . . ."

It was now Alex's turn to be irate. "Listen you obnoxious, arrogant Ass-hole, if you were more of a decent human being and loving father, your daughter would not have been afraid to share with you the fact that she had finally found someone to care for her for the rest of her life. Someone to love her more than anyone else in this lousy world could ever possibly do. You would have been happy for her and given her your blessing . . ."

Don started to physically come after Alex, arm back elbow high, fist clenched.

"I Said don't do that!" she yelled at him.

Ignoring the second warning the bull-of-a-man continued with a hard, fast swing.

Using his own momentum to topple him she grabbed his fist in her outstretched hand, swung a foot behind his extending leg and pitched him to the ground. She didn't want to be the aggressor but she would be damned if she was going to let him assault her. Nothing would have satisfied her more than to beat the crap out of the perpetrator now lying on his back in the dirt, but the looks on the faces of his wife and daughter and the slight chance that Samantha would hate her for harming him, stopped her cold.

A crowd of spectators had gathered around to witness the heated argument between this violent man and beautiful woman. More than one man had come forward to assist Alex when it was clear that Don was going to follow through with his threat of assault, but they quickly retreated to the sidelines when it was obvious to anyone watching that beauty was not all that the woman before them possessed.

Alex stared at the pathetic man now sitting on the ground trying to regain his composure. "Angel should be at the warehouse when you get there, if she isn't you just wait outside until I make sure Samantha is okay and I'll come let you in." She looked over at Sally, "Is your mom okay?"

"I think so, but she said daddy slapped Sam," the shaken young woman confessed for her father.

"You had best not have hurt her! Do you understand me Don Riley?" Eyes of steel honed in on the face of her lover's abuser. "So help me -- I'll make you regret you ever raised a hand to her. You know from past experience through your people -- I Don't Make Idle Threats!" With that

she turned and began running toward the shuttles that were now running almost continuously, with people exiting and entering the Festival grounds. She glanced back over her shoulder to spot Sally giving her father a helping hand up from the embarrassing ground. She felt sorry for the young woman who still had to put up with his ignorance and vowed to have Samantha invite her to California for an extended and perhaps life-changing visit. As for Sheila, she was angry with her for putting her girls through the life she did because she lacked ambition and a backbone to stand up to a verbally and as this situation would indicate an occasionally physically abusive husband. There were many things she was now sure she did not know about Donald Riley. There were many things she was sure she never wanted to know.

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Cassandra had doubled back through the crowd, weaving around the commotion she had instigated. She watched from afar as Don Riley lost all sense of control and made an absolute ass of himself in front of total strangers.

She would have loved to stay to personally watch the play of events when Alex discovered her lover's world had just been shattered. But, she opted for the sweeter sweetness of revenge that she would receive if she were able to personally confront her victim. She wanted to hear the anguish in Samantha's voice, see the sorrow in her body language, and feed on the hopelessness of the abandoned adult child. She was hoping in her dark heart that this event would turn Samantha against Alex, after all the young woman had just recently opened her life to being a lesbian. Losing her family might easily throw her back into the straight world, crushing the all too perfect world of one Alexis (protector of mankind) Llewellyn (lion-like) Dorian. A strong name would be no protection as Alex fell from grace, and in Cassandra's opinion that would be an awesome sight.

She followed Samantha as she left the fair grounds running as fast as her legs would take to the shuttle.

Cassandra knew the grief struck woman would not turn to see if anyone was following her, so she entered after Samantha, keeping her face away from the crying woman's view. From the parking lot close to Coast Highway she continued to keep a decent pace behind the tortured soul as she continued running toward the ocean.

At one point Cassandra almost anticipated that Samantha might be heading for the ocean in an attempt to end her agony forever but she shook her head, feeling that the young woman surely had more stamina than that.

Stamina turned out to be something the smaller woman truly possessed as she ran at top speed on the packed sand at the water's edge, due north toward the cove Cassandra knew Samantha thought of as Paradise. She had been lucky enough to have overheard the lover's discussing the private beach in the elevator. Samantha was such a romantic. Cassie laughingly had renamed the small stretch of beach, "Paradise Lost."

The tall blonde watched as Samantha bent over, grabbing her side and panting. *What's the matter, little one*, she smiled to herself, *too much exercise and rejection for you all in one day?* A short distance later Samantha collapsed into a tearful heap on the sand. Even with the distance between them, Cassie could hear the sobs of anguish. Within minutes the small woman had composed herself, straightened into a standing position, and commenced running northbound on the beach. About a mile from where the warehouse stood, keeping its lone vigil over the sea, Samantha picked up an almost perfectly straight piece of driftwood to use as support as her momentum began to slow. I almost envy your show of strength, Samantha, Cassandra thought -- Almost.

Cassie hadn't realized that she would be running a marathon today, but was glad she had the good sense to wear her comfortable sandals. They were now only about a half a mile from Samantha's destination. Cassie had known all along that Samantha would run to the private cove. She could have gotten into her car and met her there, but she wanted to keep her victim in sight. Watching the hurt she had caused play out was part of her entertainment. She figured she could always go back for her vehicle.

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Exiting the shuttle, Alex ran across the street and onto the sand. Turning left at the ocean she continued running, anticipating an almost three-mile stretch of beach ahead of her. She knew Samantha would head back toward their beach because she felt safe there, but she wanted to be behind her to make sure that nothing had happened to her on the way. A fleeting thought of taking a taxi to the warehouse and waiting for Samantha had crossed her mind, but she rejected the idea, considering that if Samantha didn't show up in an appropriate amount of time, she would be frantic and blame herself for not following her instinct.

She kept running northbound. Her eyes surveyed up the coast and encompassed the entirety of the beach as she swiftly raced toward home. She had used this distance many times before when training for martial arts competitions and was no stranger to terrain of the shoreline. Today she was running on adrenaline and fear. If she didn't meet up with Samantha along the way, she knew that at least she would be home in less than 25 minutes and could formulate a new plan from there.

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Cassie finally spotted the tip of the warehouse as the beach crooked inward to protectively hide the cove. It was one of the most beautiful spots on the Laguna shoreline and unfortunately it belong to Alex. Maybe now it would hold memories of pain as well as those of joy. For a few minutes she just watched as Samantha stood before the waters edge looking outward.

Cassandra walked up behind the smaller woman and waited patiently for her to turn around.

Hearing, or perhaps anticipating a movement in the sand, Samantha was sure she would turn around to see Alex looking back at her. Her heart lightened with the hope that her lover had

arrived to help lessen the burden she was now carrying. But the face she saw when she turned toward the cliff immediately wiped the smile that was forming from her lips.

"You!" was all that Samantha could utter at first through not yet dried tears, "What are You doing here?"

"Hi, Sweetie," came the saccharine response. "Have a nice day at the Festival?"

"Excuse me," came the incredulous retort, "how did you know I was at the Festival?"

"Actually, little darling, I'm here to rub salt in the wound and make matters worse."

"Why?" Samantha could hardly believe her ears. Moist green eyes looked questioningly at the stranger standing before. A stranger who was admitting that she was enjoying seeing her in pain, even though she didn't know the origin of the hurt. A stranger who was admitting that she was enjoying Samantha's agony and was here specifically to make the situation worse.

"Who are you? What's your name? Why are you doing this to me?"

"Whoa, girl, one question at a time. I have all the time in the world to fill you in." Cassie put her hands up in front of her to stop the smaller woman from continuing to run on with questions.

"Like I told you before, brat, you are just the innocent victim - as I once was - caught in the middle of a vicious little circle. Your precious Alex is at the beginning and the end of the circle. She's at the beginning because she's the one who began the circle by hurting Nikki. She's at the end because she is going to end up being hurt when I hurt you." She glared over at the disbelieving blonde.

"What does the relationship between Alex and Nikki have to do with me? What does it have to do with you?" Samantha questioned.

"So glad you asked, little one," Cassie began her story, "I was the one who was around to help Nikki pick up the pieces when your precious Alex left her heartbroken and suicidal." She shot daggers in Samantha's direction. "It was me, Cassandra, who nursed Nikki through that entire period of desolation, and in the process, I fell in love with her. I knew I was a rebound romance but I didn't care. She became my life, my world. After a while I came to believe that she truly was getting over Alex and falling in love with me." Inching closer to the smaller woman, her eyes became slits that oozed hatred and caused Samantha to cringe in fear. "But Alex seems to have a way of lingering in people's hearts. One night in the middle of making love, instead of saying my name at the appropriate time, 'Oh, Alex' was the phrase that escaped my lover's lips. We both were more than aware at that moment that Nikki was anything but over Alex. She rejected me and told me that it would never work out between us, her wounds were still too fresh. This was two years after their breakup . . . and the wounds were still too fresh!"

"I'm sorry," Samantha whispered, "but . . ."

"Oh, stop acting Blonde!" Cassandra shrieked at Samantha "Grow up! Shut up and listen! I'm not Alex -- your sniveling doesn't do anything but add to my pleasure. You wanted answers - I'm giving them to you!" Claw-like hands grabbed Samantha's shoulders and dug deeply into her skin. "I knew I could never harm Alex directly. Nikki would never forgive me that. I would never stand a chance with her if I hurt Alex physically.

Then you came into our little circle, an irritating speck of sand in the oyster's shell -- Nikki hated you as much as I hated Alex. My vehicle of revenge became crystal clear. All I had to do was devastate your world and I would, in turn, devastate Alex's. Nikki would be thrilled to know you were suffering; I would get revenge on your lover through your sorrow. You see, Samantha, it's really rather simple. - Hurting you became my reason for living. My little discussion with your "Daddy" today was the highlight of my year." Her eyes bore a hole directly into Samantha's soul.

Normally quite pacifistic, Samantha's mind was taking an uncommon turn. Hate was lodged in her heart next to the pain of separation from her family. The driftwood she had picked up on her miserable hike up the coastline in search of her private cove became the weapon her disposition would have never before let her brandish on anyone.

"Why you no good piece of Shit. I ought to . . ." She lashed out at the despicable piece of human garbage standing in front of her thriving on her despair.

"Wrong move, Samantha," came the quick reply as well as the evasive move. "Unless you're as familiar with martial arts as your partner, you had best put your little toy aside, tuck your tail and go home."

The young author, more versed in the writing of poems than the wielding of weapons, continued her attack.

"I hate you like I've never hated anyone in my life! You've ruined everything! And for what -- Revenge? Revenge isn't sweet Cassandra," Sam spit the villainess' name through her teeth. "It's destructive. It will not only destroy me and my family but you as well." She swung out at the agile figure who was deftly avoiding all her blows.

"You may very well be right, little warrior wanna be," Cassie continued laughing at Samantha. But look at you, trying your damndest to cause pain in return for pain being given to you. Why don't you try taking your own misguided advice?"

Catching Samantha off guard, Cassandra did a high scissor kick and knocked the driftwood staff from the clutches of her would-be assailant. Samantha was not sure what the woman intended to do with the staff, but she was sure it would not be in her best interests.

Cassie feigned hitting at Samantha to watch her jump, first to the left and then to the right. She was thoroughly enjoying taunting the smaller woman and considered giving her a quick poke in the ribs with her newly acquired weapon, just for the hell of it. She was toying with the amateur; she certainly didn't need an instrument in her hands to overwhelm the frightened young woman in front of her.

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Alex had continued at full pace the entire three miles and began worrying that perhaps she had misjudged where Samantha might go when she didn't catch up with her along the way. Her faith in herself returned when she spotted two figures ahead of her, just below the warehouse. She still was not close enough to positively recognize them, but her bet was that one of the two was her Samantha.

On closer approach her heart lifted and she definitely knew the shorter of the two women was her lover. She was holding something long and pointed in her hands when suddenly the other woman performed a martial arts move and kicked the staff out of Samantha's hands and into her own. She was teasing Samantha with it, waving it to the left and then the right and making Samantha dodge the object.

Alex had a bad feeling about the confrontation; danger emitted it's radar in her direction and she feared that soon the staff would find it's way to actually making contact with her lover's body. She started looking desperately around the beach for something to throw at the person and distract her. She watched as the taller woman poked at Samantha and Samantha jumped backward. Neither of the two were aware of anything happening outside their little realm of sand.

Sticking out of the sand, about six feet away, Alex spotted a pink frisbee. She changed her course to pick it up. She had been pretty good at throwing the smooth round objects in college when they used to have competitions in the park on the weekends. She was sure it was like riding a bicycle; you never really forgot how. Her only problem was that she had but one chance to make her mark. She needed to knock the stick out of the stranger's hand and keep Samantha from harm.

She waited until the tall blonde made her move to strike again. When she did, Alex threw the frisbee, hitting the large stick and knocking it out of the surprised woman's hands. Alex was now within a few yards of the two women. Samantha turned around, spotted Alex and started to run toward her. Alex sprinted the last couple yards to reach her lover.

Approaching the scene she asked no questions but immediately accosted the stranger whose physical demeanor was almost identical to Nikki's. *No wonder there was such a misunderstanding when Samantha first described her.*

Alex came toward the two women, side-stepping Samantha, hands and feet flying. No questions asked, she was acting on pure instinct. There was an immediate and unanticipated foot-to-jowl exchange -- the stranger was taken back but not incapacitated by the blow.

"You want a piece of me, Bitch?" The tall lanky blonde began graceful movements from side-to-side. "You started something now, Alex. I wasn't going to get physical with you, but . . ." Cassie put a hand up to her bruised jaw line. "This changes everything!"

"I want a piece of somebody today so it might as well be you," Alex countered. "Especially since I'm positive you're the one who purposely "outed" us today to Samantha's father!"

"How clever of you to figure that out all by yourself. My, my Alexis -- Nikki didn't give you enough credit for brains; seems she was stuck on the fact that you were extremely adept in the bedroom." She shot a contemptuous look in Samantha's direction to see if she had been affected by the statement; she smiled knowing the small blonde had. *Mark another point up for me*, Cassie thought as she marked an invisible "one" into the air.

An arm swung in her direction and she blocked it with her own, followed by another arm and then a leg. The two were definitely an even match for each other.

"This one's for the Open House visit," Alex yelled as she jumped and landed a swift kick in the other woman's chest area, throwing her back onto the sand.

Cassandra jumped to her feet and raced toward the broadly grinning Alex.

"Are we having fun yet tall, blonde and stupid?" Alex taunted.

It was Cassie's turn, "This one's for Nikki." She spun around, her side facing Alex as she kicked straight up with a side kick and caught Alex in the ribs.

Samantha gasped and began to run toward her lover. Alex waved her back and turned to face her adversary again.

They seemed to take turns getting in a kick here, a punch there and quite a few arm/arm, leg/leg, stand-offs. It was clear the two were both expert martial artists. At one point Cassie tried to enhance her position by kicking up sand into Alex's face. Alex pretended to be totally incapacitated by the move and covered her eyes. When Cassie came "in for the kill" she got quite a surprise, as Alex caught her leg and toppled her onto the ground. Alex jumped down, straddling her now recumbent rival.

Cassie tried to move and Alex hit her, "How did you know where we were going?" Alex yelled.

"Wouldn't you like to know!" came the sarcastic response.

Alex hit her again, "I'm gonna ask you nicely, one more time and then it is going to start getting ugly. How did you know where we were going and when?"

When Cassie declined to answer Alex drew back to level another shot at her opponent's face. "Wait!" Cassandra cried out, "The elevator . . . I placed a mic in the fucking elevator." Alex leaned back and stared into the face of her defeated foe. "You sneaky Bitch!" She pulled back to give her another fist in the face just "because" when a smaller hand grabbed her own.

"Don't Alex," sad green eyes met her steel blues, "Please, honey, enough for today. I can't take anymore," Samantha pleaded.



Alex pulled her fist from her lover's grasp and glared down at her opponent, "You don't know how lucky you are; I'd just as soon finish with you right here and now." She pushed herself back and stood, still straddling the humbled enemy. Giving Cassie a slight kick in the waist as she stepped over her, she grabbed Samantha's hand and pulled her close. "You're my salvation, you know? You'll keep me on the right path; I'm sure of it." She bent to kiss the tear-streaked face. "We'll talk in a minute, sweetheart," Alex promised as she turned again to face Cassandra.

The rumped, frustrated blonde stood up and brushed the sand from her clothes. She was bruised and beaten, but hatred still flashed from her eyes and bitterness erupted in her voice, "You think you've won, Alex? You have another think coming. You only won the battle, not the fucking war." She continued to examine her wounds and rubbed her jaw as she started to slowly back away from the duo, "We're not through yet, you and I. Not by a long shot." She turned and ran back down the beach toward the town.

Finally alone on the deserted stretch of sand the lover's held each other tightly.

"I knew you'd come in time," Samantha whispered. "You are and always will be my hero." She looked up into eyes that only now were showing the impact of the challenge that had just taken place.

"You're my world Samantha. Nobody . . ." she repeated herself, "nobody, fucks with my world without consequences!"

"Oh, Alex . . . what she did to my family . . ."

"I know, Samantha. I'm sorry she was able to do that to you. I can't rectify that hurt; I can only help you with the healing process." Alex rubbed her lover's back, holding her close and wishing she could take on the pain Samantha was feeling.

"He said he never wants to see me again, that I am dead to him." Samantha sobbed, burying her face in Alex's chest.

Alex could feel her clothing dampen as tears began to flow from the smaller woman's eyes. She felt helpless, standing in the sand holding Samantha and being unable to bring the sunshine back from behind the clouds.

"Listen, honey," Alex tilted her lover's face up, "I'm going up to the house to see what's happening. You stay here. I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise." Looking into Samantha's face she spotted the raised purple mark that looked to be the impression of a hand. In the heat of her defending Samantha against Cassandra, Alex had forgotten what Sally had told her about Don hitting Sam. Anger seized her once again. "Did your father do that to you?" she bellowed.

"It's okay, Alex. It really doesn't hurt." Samantha lied.

"Okay, my ass! Didn't I just tell you that Nobody fucks with my world? That includes your father, that son-of-a-bitch." *I should have beat the crap out of him when I had the chance.* She

thought to herself while gently caressing the dark area on her lover's face. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there Samantha." Tears welled up in her eyes as she bent to kiss the abused area. "He'll pay for this," she whispered as she looked back into her lover's eyes.

"Alex, no," was all Samantha could say as she squeezed her close.

"But Samantha . . ."

"No, please. Violence only breeds more violence. This will heal, I'll heal."

Caught between wanting revenge and desiring to do what Samantha wished, Alex found her throat tightening as well as her stomach knotting. She vowed to get even with the bastard. She might not touch him physically, but he would rue the day he fucked with Alexis Dorian. She would make certain of that.

"Come on, baby. I've got to go, but you're safe now. Nothing is going to harm you. I'll be right back."

Samantha continued to cling.

"Please, Samantha," Alex pleaded, untangling herself from a reluctant release.

"I'll be right back," she repeated as she backed away from her lover, her heart breaking at the sight of Samantha looking so small and abused. "I promise, I'll be right back. Let me just go make sure everyone is either gone or well on their way to being so."

"But what if they're up there? Shouldn't I come . . ."

"NO!" came the adamant response. "Samantha you stay right where you are. I will be back down as soon as possible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alex," Samantha conceded, too tired to argue.

Alex raced to the stairs and took them three at a time. Upon reaching the top she had a double reaction. The only vehicle on the block was Angel's red Mustang. She at once was happy that the rental car was gone and upset that she would not be able to confront Don personally. Thinking it over as she jogged to the front door, she decided it was probably best he was not still around. She would not have been able to control her temper. She knew herself too well to think she would have been able to have faced him again today and not beaten him unrecognizable. *That would have gone over really big with Samantha, you big idiot.* It was to everyone's advantage that the Riley's had already left Laguna Beach.

She was about to try the door when she noticed a huge crack down the middle of the right side. "That no good poor excuse for a man!" she mumbled. "How in the name of all that's decent did Samantha ever turn out like she did?" She slid her fingers along the entire length of the violation. "Just like a coward," she whispered to the wind.

The sound of the elevator in use broke the silence of the building as she walked in. Angel stepped out pulling a suitcase behind her. "Good! I'm glad I get to talk with you in person," the younger woman smiled up at Alex. "It's been one helluva day in Paradise, hasn't it?"

"That's an understatement!" Alex commented. "You all finished moving?"

"Yeah, this is the last of it," she nodded behind her at the luggage. "First off I want to thank you for the use of your home, your help moving into my new place and the job I'll be starting in the morning."

"You welcome for all."

"Secondly, there's a note from me -- which you can discard -- and a note from Samantha's sister on the door to the apartment."

Alex could not help asking, "Did Mr. Riley do any damage inside the building?" She pointed to the vandalized stained glass door.

"Oh, Shit! What a bastard!" Angel shook her head. "No. Actually, Sally told me that he told his wife the he didn't want to set foot in Satan's den ever again and made them come in and do all the packing. He's a real piece of work isn't he?"

"That is your second understatement of the day!" Alex smiled slightly, "If the door was the only damage he did, I guess I got off easy. I've been on his shit list for years now. This act of childishness is just like him." She turned and put a hand on the smaller woman's shoulder. "Thanks for letting them in; I'm glad I didn't have to come home to them sitting on the curb waiting for me."

"Sure, happy to oblige! How's Samantha . . . ah . . . where's Samantha?"

"Samantha is as good as she can be right now. She's down on the beach waiting for me to come back down. I think I'll go on up and get Sally's note; I'm sure it will help the healing process to begin. Maybe I'll pick up a little liquid fortification while I'm at it."

"All right then, I guess I'll be on my way. Thanks again, Alex. Tell Sam I'm sorry the weekend didn't finish off the way you two had anticipated."

"It will all work out, I'm sure of it. It will be tough on her for a while, but hopefully he'll have a change of heart somewhere down the road." She stepped inside the elevator and put her arms up on either side of the door, slightly leaning out, "I only wish that for Samantha's sake. I could care less if I ever come face-to-face with the bastard again."

"Yeah, well, I hope so, too, for Samantha's sake. By the way here are your keys. I figured I'd bring them to you in the morning, but . . ."

Alex reached out and took the set of keys from Angel. "Okay, see you around 10 tomorrow."

Angel turned and walked down the hall, "Okay, bye Alex."

When the doors opened on the third floor, Alex ran from the elevator to the apartment door, stuffed the envelopes in her pocket and raced through the living area to the bathroom. At least relieved of that situation, she hurried back into the kitchen where she grabbed the wineskin she had hanging in the pantry and filled it with Merlot; a little nectar of the Gods would help to ease the pain. There was still a hunk of sharp cheddar in the refrigerator and a couple bagels still in a bag. She draped the wineskin over her shoulder, put the cheese and bagels into one bag, left the apartment and headed back to the beach.

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Samantha looked around at the empty beach. She felt smaller than she had in long, long time. Her entire world had come crashing down around her in the span of a few short hours. She found a small sand dune surrounded by pathetic little bushes and sat down in the middle of it, her elbows on her bent knees, hands on her chin. She was an orphan of sorts. She had lost her father, her mother and her sister and had been confronted by an enemy not of her own making. Her only consolation was her hero, her Alex, her bigger-than-life white knight who was both willing and able to sweep her off her feet and carry her to the castle on the top of the cliff. It never entered her mind that all of today's dilemmas were directly related to her association with Alex and had it occurred to her the thought would have been immediately dismissed. Alex had become her protector, her lover, her world. She wouldn't go back to her existence B.A. (before Alex), even if she could have vanquished all the other hurts. They would make it through this together. She knew in her heart that her mother still loved her and was merely too weak to go up against her father. She knew that her sister still loved her and would find a way to keep in touch. As for her dad, she would learn to live with his hate, as much as she hurt now, she would heal in spite of him.

A soft sound invaded her thoughts and she cocked her head to listen. Other than the rhythmic crashing of the waves against the shoreline, silence again greeted her ears. She became self-absorbed again, wishing for Alex to hurry and join her, when there was a rustle in the bushes next to her. Samantha jumped, still on edge from all the negative interactions of the day. The sound repeated and she smiled. She sat very still and waited to hear it again.

"Mew, mew."

Samantha made a soft hissing-like sound she had always used to call her favorite cat when she was a child. Seconds later her call was answered.

"Mew, mew," and again the rustling in the bush.

"Come here, sweet thing," Samantha coaxed.

The soft sound seemed to be closer, then turned frantic as a "M-e-o-w, m-e-o-w," reached Samantha's ears. The blonde stood and slowly inched toward the bush, not wanting to frighten

what sounded like a very small cat. The screech returned and Samantha parted the bush to find a small black kitten tangled in the vines at the bottom of the bush, unable to free herself.

"Oh, you poor baby," Samantha crooned, forgetting all her own troubles. She reached down and gently tore away the offending vines as she picked the kitten up. Two sky blue eyes looked up into the face of her own "hero", as the little creature began licking Samantha's hand. "Why you can't be more than a couple weeks old. Where's you mommy, little one?" she questioned.

She sat back down on the dune and stroked the soft ebony hair that reminded her so much of Alex's. The fur was so black that when the sunlight sparkled on it from just the right angle, Samantha swore she could see a reflecting rainbow.

"I'm going to call you Rainbow because you appeared after a horrible storm to brighten my day."

She was sitting there petting her new found friend when Alex walked up behind her. "There you are," she said as she crouched down in front of her lover, displaying gifts. "I brought food and wine," she smiled, then wrinkled her brow. "What do you have there?"

"A little black Rainbow," came the cryptic answer.

"Okay, I'll bite . . ."

Samantha held out the small kitten. "She was caught in the underbrush and when I stroked her fur in the sunlight, I saw a beautiful rainbow."

"Samantha, she's black."

"Haven't you ever seen a rainbow in an oil slick on blacktop? I have." She looked down at the small bundle on her lap. "I don't care, I saw a rainbow and rainbows always come after the storm to clear the air and make everything that was ugly, beautiful. Can we keep her Alex, please?" she beseeched.

"Sure, why not. Cats are always a plus in a beach town, but do I have to call her Rainbow?"

"Yes!"

"But, Samantha, I'll feel like an idiot, she's b . . ."

"Rainbow is her name," the smaller woman smiled up and grabbed her lover's hand. "Oh, Alex, I think things will work out. It'll take time, I won't kid myself, and you'll need to be patient with me," tears began forming again in Samantha's eyes.

Alex sat down next to her lover, put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. She decided to give her Sally's note a little later; it seemed as though Sam was starting to deal with the situation at hand and she wanted this time alone with her. Samantha could read the letter on her own later and share if she so desired or not, but now was a time for just the two of them.

The entire time she was running along the shoreline looking for Samantha, Alex had been formulating a little speech that she hoped would explain to Sam how much she cared and how they would get through this catastrophe if they just stuck it out together. She was sure Samantha had no intention of leaving her but she wanted to solidify her place in her lover's heart. Now seemed as good a time as any to express her feelings.

"Samantha," Alex began, "families are eccentric entities. Just because we are born into one doesn't guarantee that those people will love us our entire lives. Or even if they do, that they will be our friends. On the other hand, we go through life accumulating people who eventually become a family outside our relatives, and sometimes these other people become even more important to us. It's always nice to be able to integrate the two, but not everyone has that luxury. At this point in your life, it looks like you're going to have to rely on your second family, the one I belong to," she looked down at the small being in her lover's hand, "and . . . Rainbow . . . and hope that your first family will someday accept you for who you really are."

Samantha smiled up at Alex with tears in her eyes. She stretched her neck to kiss the supple lips she loved. "I love you, Alex."

Alex, dug into her pocket, "If I were superstitious -- which I'm not -- I would consider that kitten in your lap an extremely positive prophetic sign, one of only good things to look forward to." Again she smiled and kissed Samantha on the cheek. "I picked this up for you on the way to get the drinks we never got to enjoy today. I love you, Samantha." She handed Samantha a glittering rainbow sticker to be placed on the back window of the Volkswagen. The sticker was in the shape of a cat.

## **Epilogue**

It wasn't going to be easy piecing together all that had tumbled down upon their heads. Their lives had changed drastically in the span of a few short hours.

Samantha explained to Alex the situation between Cassandra and Nikki and why the tall blonde considered Alex her enemy and was so set on ruining her and all that she cared for. The fair-haired romantic was even able to tell the story in such a way as to not make Cassie out to be a total villainess. Alex, on the other hand, had a difficult time agreeing with her lover and still felt that she should have beat her senseless before setting her loose. She argued that at least she should have given her up to the police, reminding Samantha of all the mental and physical damage she caused, as well as the vandalism the woman had been guilty of. Alex vowed that the elevator would be stripped first thing in the morning of the invasive piece of equipment that had been haunting them unknowingly since the open house.

From her fiery exit they knew they had not seen the last of the angry woman. Alex told Samantha that she intended to have a long discussion with Nikki about the entire situation. Sam started to object but thought better of it and merely shook her head. She figured Alex was probably right and at least they might get a better idea of what to expect next from the blonde psychotic by questioning Nikki.

More than once through the conversations Sam's green eyes swelled with tears that could not help but overflow; her consolation was that "her hero" was there this time to wipe the tears away and comfort her.

To bring a spark of sunshine back into the conversation Alex told Samantha that Sally had left her a note and the small blonde decided that she wanted to share the letter with Alex right from the beginning, so Alex fished it out of her pocket and hoped that her heart was right in thinking that the letter would be a positive one. Samantha slowly read the note out loud:

*Dear Sammie:*

*I only have a few minutes to write because mom is almost done packing and daddy would explode if he knew I was writing this. I just want you to know that I think Alex is perfect for you. She will be your protector as well as the love of your life, and with her to help you through this mess that tore our family apart today, I just know everything will at least be happy in Laguna.*

*I'm sorry daddy had to find out the way he did, but you know as well as I do that no matter how or when he found out, the reaction would have been the same. To think it would have ended any differently, we would have only been fooling ourselves. Finding out that it was Alexis Dorian who stole your heart made it even more difficult for him to accept.*

*I can guarantee that mom does not hold daddy's views, but you know as well as I do that she is too weak to go against him. We will keep in touch, mom and I -- I promise, Sammie. I'll give you a call from work sometime next week and we can talk.*

*Things will eventually work out -- they have to. I love you, Sally.*

The smile on Samantha's lips at the end of the letter made Alex glad she had told her about the message. Sally was a pretty special young woman and Alex was glad she would continue to be a part of Samantha's life.

About halfway through the bread, cheese, and wine the discussion led to Don Riley. Samantha's hand went up to her cheek which still bore the mark of her last encounter with her father. The movement was not lost on the watchful eyes of her lover and Alex gently removed the small hand from the offending bruise and pulled Samantha closer.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't there to stop him from doing that, Samantha," she confessed, her own eyes tearing up at the thought of the pain he had inflicted.

"It happened so quickly, there would have been nothing you could have done anyway, Alex," Samantha assured her.

"But he would have been sorry for doing it," came the rebuttal.

"No, Alex -- that would have just made things worse. I would not have been able to stand by and watch you destroy him in front of all those people." She looked up into Alex's face and they shared the wiping away of tears. "I love you, Alex, and I know you love me. This family situation will clear itself up eventually one way or the other and I will learn to live with it. At least we have your parents, and like you mentioned earlier, even though I might have lost part of one family, I still have another to support and love me."

Alex was sure the small blonde was putting up a front, not wanting to let on just how much she hurt inside. The dark-haired protector felt a shiver go through the body she was holding so closely it seemed like an extension of her own. She kissed the top of her lover's head and whispered comforting words in her ear. Samantha let out a long sigh and looked out toward the ocean, her head leaning back on Alex's chest. They remained silent for a while, taking in the beauty of the landscape before them, each lost in her own thoughts.

By the time they finished off the food, the day had turned to dusk, and by the time the wineskin was fully drained, the sun was well on its way to being extinguished from the summer sky. The two lovers found themselves observing what had come to be a tradition for them a Laguna sunset.

Alex sat with her back against the dune, Samantha cuddled up close, snuggled in between long, strong legs, her head against Alex's chest. Rainbow was curled up in a ball in Samantha's lap and had been sleeping through most of the afternoon.

"As beautiful as the day started out and as horrible as it was in the middle. Sitting here with you and this little bundle, with the gorgeous hues of orange, pink, purple, and blue in the sky and the soft roar of the ocean, I just know someone or something is watching out for us and that everything will fall into place the way it is meant to be." Samantha put the kitten down on the sand and turned to face her lover, kneeling on the dune, her arms around Alex's neck; she kissed her passionately. "You really are all I need to be happy," she whispered, putting her lips close to the perfectly formed ear she loved to nibble on.

"I love you, too, Samantha," Alex began, but it's getting cool out here and we had better be heading inside. She returned Samantha's kiss then stood, pulling her lover up with her. "Come on, get the little fur-child and let's go home."

They turned away from the ocean after viewing the last glimpse of the sun as it touched the horizon, but not before they both caught sight of the first star of the evening. Each of the lovers made a silent wish, and unbeknownst to them, the wishes were identical. If they were, indeed, being protected and watched over by an omnipresent entity then their wishes would surely be granted, and they would spend the rest of their lives loving each other and sharing Laguna Nights.