

# ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## Part 1

### Chapter 1

Alternative Paradise was celebrating its 'a little over one month' birthday and it certainly had turned into the place to be in Laguna. The Center had been buzzing with clientele since the doors first opened to the public, hardly giving Alex and Samantha a chance to think about anything else in their lives.

In a way that was a blessing, especially with the young blonde trying to surmount the hurdle of her father disowning her after he found out that she and the beautiful dark-haired executive, his long-time nemesis, were lovers.

Most of that fateful day had been laid to rest, with only a few loose ends to tie up before they could continue moving forward with their lives. Alex still intended to have a long heart-to-heart with Nikki about the part Cassandra had played in the horrid experience. But, she was having a difficult time getting together with her ex-lover; every time she called to talk, Nikki was out of town, or at least not answering her phone.

Samantha was not looking forward to the reunion of the two old flames, but she knew that to bring some closure to the nasty ordeal, the meeting was a necessary evil. When they first discussed involving the ex-girlfriend so they could truly understand the hatred Cassandra was carrying around for Alex, Samantha had balked at her lover going alone. She had wanted to be present. But Alex had, as delicately as possible, explained to Samantha that if they wanted all the grizzly details, such as what had happened to Cassie since that day and whether or not she was going to continue to be a problem in their lives, then Alex had to meet with her 'ex' alone. In an uncomfortable atmosphere Nikki would never open up and talk. Alex knew Nikki well enough to know there would be no civility if Samantha were present.

Today, all thoughts of the fiasco were tucked away in deep recesses to make room for the party Samantha thought would be a nice 'thank you' to the people who had contributed to making Alternative Paradise the success that it was well on its way to becoming -- the supporting patrons and the Center's employees.

The vivacious blonde had insisted on balloons and a catered lunch for the customers and the staff to celebrate the acceptance that the small town had given the new and now thriving business. She had dubbed the affair a 'No-Labor Day Party', as today was the beginning of the popular holiday weekend.

The success of the establishment was unsurpassed in all of Laguna. Starting from the very first day there had been a waiting list for the extremely popular climbing wall, as well as people flocking to the martial arts classes, the esoteric lectures, and the large variety of new age and old school massages available. The doctors in the small beach town were delighted to be able to send their patients to a fully equipped physical therapy clinic where they didn't have to worry as to whether the treatments were legitimate and whether or not the individuals treating the patients were licensed and experienced.

Within the first week the front desk had been bombarded with a constant stream of requests from parents whose children wanted to learn how to swim in the huge pool with the frolicking sea creatures. The demand became so great that Alex decided to go ahead and add a swimming program to the list of Center activities. She had never dreamed that the painted sea animals would cause such a boost in the popularity of the establishment, but she certainly was grateful for the enthusiasm of the customers. Her dream was definitely beginning to fulfill more than just her desire to help others, and her investors would be grinning all the way to the bank.

The same decorating and catering crews that had been used for the open house just 30-some days before were invited back to recreate their magic for this new celebration. The buffet table had been laid out in the exact location as the first along the west windows, showing off the magnificent seascape. There were, of course, ice sculptures - this time in the guise of small otters, and the fountain was a spinning dolphin with champagne punch constantly streaming from its mouth.

"I love balloons!" Samantha exclaimed when the decorating was almost completed.

"Come on Alex, help me decide where these extras can go," the small blonde begged with a come hither grin on her impish face.

"Hey, you know that's your department. Us executive-types don't go in much for the frilly stuff." She grabbed the excited towhead around the waist and spun her, then whispered. "You really know how to throw a party. Want to have a private one a little later tonight while the balloons are still flying, but the guests have all gone home?"

"Behave yourself -- someone will think we're intimately involved." Sam giggled, giving the tall brunette a quick peck on the cheek then disengaging from the strong hands.

As Alex feigned pouting, her lover added, "But to answer your question, you got yourself a date! By the way have I told you lately how proud I am of you and your vision?"

"Well, maybe once or twice, but you can always repeat statements like that."

"Okay, then -- I'm really proud of you Alex. This little building full of fun mixed with pain is just what Laguna ordered. The people love this place."

"Yeah, they do seem to gravitate here don't they? The only problem is we haven't been able to take a weekend off in over a month. But, ya know, we're going rectify that really soon. Now that we know the crew and I have people around I can trust . . . we're going on a short vacation."

"Oh, Alex -- what fun! Where, when, who's going to watch the Center?"

"Whoa, girl. Give me a little time to coordinate things."

"Then why did you tell me about it already?"

"To let you know that I haven't forgotten about the important date that's coming up soon." Alex smiled, took a balloon out of Samantha's hand, and let it float to the ceiling. "Why don't you just let some of these float around, adding a touch of color wherever they land?"

"What an uninhibited idea -- you sure it's yours? Are you feeling okay?" The small blonde touched her hand to the taller woman's forehead in a mocking gesture. "No, no fever," she laughed. "Actually, it's a great idea, floating happiness, I'll put long strings on them so the kids can grab one and take it home and maybe put some weights on a few for the little ones to reach." She changed the subject back to that of a vacation. "So, tell me Alex where and when?"

"Where and when what?" The quizzical eyebrow ascended as a tiny smile graced the executive's face.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You can't just drop a vacation thought and then go merrily on your way without giving me a least a crumb of a detail." Samantha's eyes squinted in her most intimidating of looks. "Come on Alex, tell me something!" She pleaded.

"Tonight. I'll tell you something tonight. Right now I've got a few clinic notes to dictate before this little affair of yours gets underway."

"Alex," the small blonde whined.

"Seriously, Samantha, Dr. Sona sent an entire family over here yesterday after a three-car collision and I've got evals to finalize."

Concern replaced the pout. "I hope no one was hurt too badly."

"No, nothing really serious, but a few of them will have some extended therapy to undergo. I'll be in my office if you need me." She turned and headed down the hall with Samantha watching as she disappeared from sight.

"You got away with not telling me a damn thing," Samantha yelled at her lover's disappearing form. *She is so good at changing subjects when she doesn't want to answer! Oh, well, I'll get it out of her later tonight when I have the upper hand.* Sam smiled knowing the effect she had on her dark angel and that Alex could deny her nothing.

Alex shook her head, smiling as she continued to walk toward her office, seemingly ignoring the scolding she was receiving from her golden girl. The 20th of September would be here before they knew it, and she had arrangements to solidify. This would be their first birthday celebration and Alex wanted to make Samantha's 27th an affair to remember.

Originally Alex had wanted to whisk Samantha off to the Greek Isles where her fair-haired beauty could bask in the sun under ancient trees and gaze at the same evening sky as the illustrious Sappho had done in days long forgotten. She told the younger woman of a 'female only' cruise line where they could relax and be themselves for the entire trip. She was becoming almost as enthusiastic as Samantha and felt she had best check the itinerary of the cruise line before continuing. After checking the schedule on the Internet, she had to reluctantly inform Samantha that they had missed the yearly trip that that particular company made to the Mediterranean. As it turned out, the ship had sailed right around the time Samantha was falling from a climbing wall into eagerly awaiting arms.

Greece and the Isle of Lesbos were a definite future pilgrimage, but that now left Alex with a blank canvas to work on as to what to do for this year's celebration. As luck would have it, Gary Black had e-mailed her again, reiterating that he was ready to put some of his expansion plans to work and would like her to come to Sedona to go over them with him. Realizing that she could incorporate business with a mini-vacation, she took him up on the offer to stay at his resort while they were there, with the stipulation that he would loan them a Jeep for a few days to explore the territory around the mystic town. More than willingly he agreed to all her demands and Alex set into motion planning for the trip. Now that she had everything blueprinted in her mind she thought it time to begin getting Samantha excited without spilling the entire surprise.

Alex glanced at the gold plaque on her office door: Alexis Dorian, Physical Therapist/Owner. *It should read: Alex, lover of Samantha.* It seemed that everything in her life now seemed to take a

back seat to the imp of a woman would appeared one night on a stretch of white sand and turned her world upside down.

She opened the door and breathed in the salt air filtering through the open louvers. Gazing out at her private view of the Pacific, she drifted off in thought to the plans she had for her lover's birthday. First she had called her mom and asked if she had any press releases or speaking engagements around the 20th of September. Aurora told her she wouldn't be needing the plane until November, when she had a lecture tour starting, but that she expected to see the two young women before they took off, after all they had to pass La Jolla on the way to the airport.

After talking to her mom, Alex called and informed the maintenance people in San Diego that she would be taking the Cessna up on the 21st and for them to have it inspected and gassed before they arrived. Initially trepidation about flying with Samantha in the plane had set her stomach to tumbling. She had not soloed for at least six months, but flying had always been like second nature to Alex, so she bid the negative thoughts to retreat to wherever it was they came from and refocused on planning a trip that would surely become a precious memory. A commotion outside her door made her glance at her watch. The party would be underway shortly so she needed to get started on the dictation while she was still in the mood. There was no way she was going to work over this holiday weekend, and she surely didn't want reports staring her in the face first thing Tuesday morning.

Sitting down at her desk, the executive picked up the first chart and began dictating, "This 28-year-old patient was involved in a automobile collision on . . ."

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For approximately an hour and a half, the party had been going in full swing when the fair-haired hostess decided that she had not seen her partner in far too long. Dodging patrons and crew Sam made her way slowly to Alex's office in hopes of rescuing her from paperwork drudgery.

Unfortunately, meeting up with Alex was not going to be as easy a task as she had anticipated. Every few steps someone wanted to congratulate her on the success of either the business or the party.

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Kim Johanson had arrived from Seattle two weeks earlier to begin setting up the biofeedback station. The tall woman, with soft gray eyes and prematurely graying hair, had been having some technical problems with a few of the machines. She had sent them back and just received the new equipment via UPS this morning. Time was fast approaching the deadline for opening up her section of the Center. Clients had already signed up for treatments and lessons and today seemed as good a day as any to try to get everything completed. Her only problem as she tried getting everything arranged was that she needed an extra pair of hands to set the replacement equipment into position and get it tested. Glancing out of the bio-room into the hall she spotted Samantha heading toward the western side of the building.

"Hey Sam, could I borrow you for a few minutes?"

"Ah, sure, I guess so," came the reluctant reply, followed by a small grin to hide her disappointment at being deterred once again while on her way to get Alex. "What kind of help do you need?"

The mild-mannered neurobiofeedback therapist ushered Samantha into her two-room wonderland. "I need a 'guinea pig' for a few minutes to test a few of the machines that have just arrived. I know you're in the middle of a party. I promise not to keep you too long. It's just that I'm leaving town tonight and won't be back until Tuesday when the first clients are supposed to be here bright and early."

"Uh, huh."

"If I don't get the machines set up now . . . well . . . it would just be a lot easier if you could play 'patient' for a minute or two."

"Sure, the party's going strong without me and Alex is tucked away in her office doing the Goddess knows what by this time."

Equipment that looked like something out of Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory caught Samantha's eye. There were headsets and monitors scattered throughout the room, as well as EMG, EEG, and EKG machines.

"You know, Kim, we never have talked about exactly what it is you do with all this stuff. I know Alex is familiar with some of it, but this . . ." she picked up one of the hand held galvanic skin response monitoring devices for use at home, turning it over in her hands, ". . . what does this do?"

"That's used to help monitor stress levels. You rest two fingers on those plates there and it helps you learn to increase the temperature in your hands, it's called 'hand warming' biofeedback. It's helpful for reducing headaches as well as tension and muscle relaxation."

"Hum, interesting."

The older woman came over and put her hands around Samantha's. "Feel the coolness of my hands?"

"Ah, yeah."

"Well, if I had, say a migraine, my hands might even be cooler than this. Initially, until I could learn to control my body temperature on my own, I would use one of these machines to let me know when I was succeeding."

"So all this stuff is for tension, stress and headaches?"

"No, Samantha, there are many uses for biofeedback. I'll be seeing clients with ADD/ADHD, hypertension, anxiety disorder, depression, insomnia, fibromyalgia as well as those with chronic and migraine headaches. Then there is the ability to increase your memory, help with reaching peak performance levels, and goal oriented functions as well. It's a field that we've hardly begun to tap. But . . . I'm rambling. You asked a simple question and I began a lecture, sorry."

"Hey, that's okay. I should know a little about all the disciplines we offer here at the Center. That way if I'm doing some PR work, at least I'll sound as if I know what I'm talking about. Actually, I should probably spend a little time in here with you when you're first getting started, before it gets so busy you don't have time to fill me in."

"That would be great, Sam, anytime you want, my doors are always open." She turned to the nearest machine and began explaining, "Now, here's one of the programs I need to check out today. Why don't you sit down here and let me check your temperature, pulse, heart rate and respiration. The way they throw things around delivering them, I don't want to try it out on a patient and . . ."

". . . Fry their brains?" The small blonde laughed as she stared at the wires and accessories. "But a guinea pig can be replaced?"

"No. I'd never do anything that I thought would hurt you." Kim smiled back at the small woman sitting uneasily in the chair. She found herself thinking that Alex sure found herself a winner this time and if the dark-haired executive was ever stupid enough to mess . . . *Thoughts like that will lose you friends* . . . she reprimanded herself. Bringing her thoughts back to the present situation, she concluded . . . "Besides, Alex would kill me, if anything happened to you while you were in my care!"

Samantha was extremely patient with the new clinician, but each time they finished checking out one piece of equipment, Kim would find something else that was a necessity to examine. Finally they had inspected every piece of new machinery, and it all passed the therapist's scrutiny. Along the way Samantha had received a few mini lessons and she came away more informed about and a bit more comfortable with the field of biofeedback.

In the process the blonde also learned a little more about Kim, what she had studied after graduating from USC, and why she had chosen her field. They skirted around the personal but never really delved into the solitary life of the gentlewoman who healed with thought. A fleeting image of pairing Kim up with Angel crossed Samantha's mind, but was quickly dismissed; she liked the quiet woman, which was more than she could say for Angel.

Samantha's mind wandered as Kim fooled around fixing this control and monitoring that one, until everything was running smoothly and to perfection. Sam thought back on how she had gotten to know Angel a little better in the month or so the clinic had been operating and had always tried her damndest to be cordial to the petite brunette. It just seemed that Angel turned into a different person whenever Alex walked into a room. From Samantha's observation, the small olive-skinned woman would be handling a situation with ease until the tall executive showed up, at which time Angel would find some excuse to get Alex involved in the treatment or

whatever it was she was busy doing. The *'I need your help'* charade was enough to turn Samantha's stomach and it didn't do much for her Irish temper, either. The green-eyed monster that slept close to Samantha's heart still pinched her every time Angel went anywhere near her Alex. Sam wasn't proud of the jealous streak that had attached itself to her personality since she had fallen in love with Alex; it was a characteristic she had never had to deal with before, and she hated the way it made her feel. The small woman was working diligently on vanquishing the little monster, but was finding it an extremely difficult chore. In the meantime, Sam kept on hoping that her instincts were wrong and that Angel would actually turn out to be the friend she was giving lip-service to being.

Experienced fingers began unhooking Samantha from the machine they were testing, jogging the blonde from her thoughts of the occasionally irritating Italian.

Out of the corner of her eye, Kim glanced at the face of her watch. "Damn, Sam. I've kept you in here over an hour. I'm sorry." As quickly as possible the therapist unhooked the rest of the leads, fumbling with the wires and blushing. "The time just flew by. I didn't mean to keep you away from your party so long."

"That's okay, Kim. There's only so much small talk I can participate in at these functions, after a while it tends to become repetitious and boring. Helping you out was actually fun and more than just a little informative. I'm glad you pulled me into your lair."

"So, you felt like a fly caught in the web, huh?" The soft-spoken woman smiled down at Samantha. "I hope it didn't resemble a torture chamber too closely." *If the experience was at least a little on the pleasant side, maybe she'll stop into my 'lair' for a visit occasionally. That smile of hers could have turned Mr. Hyde into a decent person.*

Samantha blushed at the thought that perhaps she had offended the gentlewoman standing in front of her by off-handedly referring to her office as a lair and web. She felt the need to rectify the insinuation. "No . . . I didn't mean to imply . . ."

"It's okay, Samantha, I was only kidding back with you," Kim quickly interjected, not wanting the blonde to steer clear of her part of the Center in the future.

"Oh . . . okay . . . I didn't want to hurt your feelings . . . I was only fooling around and . . ." *Change the subject, stupid!* "So, are you ready for your clients to come beating down the doors now?"

"Yes, I think I am. I'm going to rearrange a few things but other than that I'll be open for business Tuesday morning. Thanks again, Samantha. You had better get back to your guests." She leaned over and gave the smaller woman a 'thank you' hug and peck on the cheek.

Sam was beginning to take notice that all of Alex's friends were on the tall side. She had never thought of herself as being of subnormal stature, but every time she got around any of Alex's buddies, she managed to come away feeling vertically challenged.



She smiled at the mild-mannered clinician. Having her come down from Seattle to join the ranks at Alternative Paradise had been a good business decision and perhaps a good social one as well. She and Kim were going to have to spend some time comparing their opinion of Washington State with each other; it would be nice to talk about 'home' with another native.

"See you later, Kim. If I don't see you before you leave, have a good weekend."

"Will do, you, too. Tell Alex I'll see her Tuesday."

"Okay, I'll tell her." Once again she headed in the direction of Alex's office, thinking to herself that maybe now she could finally reach her initial destination and find her reclusive lover.

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The dark-haired executive was sitting with her chair turned away from her desk and toward the ocean, when Samantha quietly opened the door. Through the window's reflection she spotted the small blonde as the door quietly opened, but the executive gave no acknowledgement that she was aware of the entrance. Feeling totally confident that Alex had not heard her enter, Samantha stealthily approached the huge desk, the carpet muffling her footsteps. She crept around the side of the desk and reached out her hand to touch Alex's shoulder.

Deft fingers almost closed around Samantha's before the blonde screamed and jumped back in surprise, losing her footing and toppling to the floor.

"Well, I almost gotcha," the small woman squealed from an awkward sitting position, "I was this close." She demonstrated the proximity with her fingers, holding thumb and forefinger within a breath's width of each other.

"You were only that close, because I let you get that close," Alex smiled, kneeling beside her fallen angel. "I've been missing you, sitting here all alone with nothing but these reports to keep me company." The dark beauty leaned closer to the face she adored and planted a kiss on eagerly awaiting lips. "You taste marvelous."

"Ditto. You know, I started after you almost two hours ago, that party outside your door has been going pretty much on its own without either of us," Samantha confessed.

"So, what took you so long to get here, dare I ask?" She arched and accusatory brow.

"It's a long story, I'll tell you later."

"Okay, then, maybe we should venture out and join your little party in progress."

"No hurry," Samantha replied as she reached out her arms, tempting the kneeling form before her to bridge the distance between their bodies.

Never needing to be invited twice, Alex closed the gap between her lover and herself, drawing the small frame close and inhaling the fragrance of Shalimar. "I've missed you today," Alex professed as she showered her lover with tender kisses.

Sans further discussion the two bodies reclined, padded by a soft, thick Oriental rug surrounding the desk.

"This room hasn't been initiated yet." Sparkling blue eyes stared down into emerald green, a devilish smile spreading quickly on the executive's face. Swift fingers found refuge under a soft silk blouse, exploring even softer skin that had begun to ripple with bumps elicited by the welcomed gentle touch.

"Hmmm. That is way too enticing." The smaller woman snuggled into her lover's arms, then whispered into her ear. "Tell you what . . . how about a rain check . . . say five minutes after everyone is gone. I'm a little door shy after the near fiasco in the garage with the workman walking in on us."

"This is not a public office, but I guess you're right, after all, you didn't bother to lock the door on the way in."

"I didn't lock the door?" her green eyes twinkled as she pushed up on the taller woman. "I was coming in to check on you, not to be seduced. I didn't have door locking on my mind."

"Too bad for you . . . now you'll have to wait . . . unless . . ." Bringing herself to a straddling position above the small blonde she attempted one last sensuous tease to coax Samantha into abandoning her desire to rejoin the party in progress. One strong hand found it's way between her lover's legs as she pushed down, rotating her fingers to encompass the whole of Samantha's passion.

"By the Gods Alex . . ." A shiver ran through Samantha's body, love bumps reforming on the pale skin of her exposed abdomen. "To Tartarus with the . . ."

A knock broke the concentration of the pair, with a voice following the knock - "Alex are you in there?"

Alex jumped up from her position, reached down and pulled Samantha up to stand beside her.

"I told you we'd get caught," Samantha whispered.

Alex turned to the door, "Um, Kim?"

"Yeah."

Quickly straightening their outfits the lovers grinned at each other and shook their heads.

"Come on in." Alex called out.

The door opened and an amused look immediately crossed the face of the executive's old schoolmate when she spotted the two women standing awkwardly next to the desk. "Still trapping women in offices, huh Alex?" She glanced over at the disheveled blonde, "Looks like I'm on a roll of disturbing whatever it is you are attempting to accomplish today, Sam."

"Is that so?" Alex chimed in.

"Yeah, I held her up a little bit ago, getting her to help me set up a few of the new machines. What I wanted to tell you was that I'm getting ready to leave. I'll be back Tuesday morning. I guess I should have stuck with letting Samantha deliver that message, because it looks like I may have interrupted an 'important' discussion here." Kim made the facetious statement as she cast a whimsical look in the direction of the small blonde, who was still adjusting her clothing. "By the way, don't you two know there's a party going on outside this door?" Shaking a disbelieving head, she grinned broadly at the women who looked like small children, who had gotten caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

"Of course we do," Alex started to answer. "Samantha had a problem with her . . ."

"Yeah, right . . . do you think I just fell off the turnip wagon Alexis? I went through four years of college with you, remember? Besides look at the color of your accomplice's face."

Crimson skin greeted the eyes of her lover as Alex gazed into guilty eyes. "You would never make a business spy, Samantha, you are much too easy to read."

The three friends laughed at the thought of someone other than Kim having been the one at the door, and the jest of the conversation that would have followed had that been the case.

Alex took full responsibility for the compromising position, but assured her friend she would do it all over again, given the same situation. They laughed and talked shop for a few more minutes then the lovers walked with Kim as far as the buffet table. Kim explained that she was traveling a short distance up the coast to visit another buddy from school for the long weekend. She wanted to get out of town before the traffic started getting bad. Samantha told her to be careful and to watch out for all the 'crazies' on the road. Alex dittoed the sentiment and the clinician took leave of her friends.

"Okay." Alex began turning back to Samantha, "You dragged me out here, guess it's time to go socialize." Giving her lover's hand a slight squeeze, the dark-haired executive put on her best professional smile and demeanor, left her partner's side and began to mingle.

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Finally, the time had come to disengage the smile that had been pasted on her face for the last few hours. What was supposed to have concluded at dusk had extended into early evening. *Some people never know when to call it a day* - the thought had been roaming through her mind since the sun had disappeared into the ocean. It had been an interesting party, but enough was enough. Constant smiling had led to an aching jaw and a pounding head. After shutting of the lights and

locking the doors, she took a minute to rub her temples to try to dispel a little of the nagging pain that was turning into a constant throb. Samantha was on the second floor making sure it was void of guests and turning out lights up there. They had agreed to meet in the apartment. It had been a long afternoon and she was definitely looking forward to a quiet evening alone with the small blonde.

The ride up in the silent elevator was a blessing after the noise of the afternoon. Upon exiting she set the security system. *We won't be going anywhere this evening; I don't intend to move from this area of the apartment.* The aroma of vanilla tantalized her nostrils as she walked through to the living room. Flickering light signaled that candles were definitely the origin of the sweet fragrance, while soft jazz spoke soothingly to her ears. *Thank the Goddess, she read my mind. Candles, music and Samantha -- now all I need to do is find Samantha.*

"If you had turned right instead of left coming in the door you would have found me," a voice came from behind her.

Alex turned to see the love of her life carrying two glasses full of a dark red liquid.

"Merlot to soothe the savage beast?"

"Are you calling me a beast?" Alex grinned.

"If the fur fits," Samantha giggled, handing Alex a glass.

After taking a sip the dark-haired woman put her arm around the small frame of her lover. "I love the atmosphere up here at the top of our world. What more could I ask for? I have candlelight, soft music, good wine and you. I do consider myself quite lucky, you know?"

"I was hoping you'd feel that way. Maybe you would even consider picking up where we left off hours ago downstairs in your office. Do you think that would be possible?" Sea green eyes sparkled in the flickering light as a smile danced across her lips.

"Your wish is my command." Alex took the glass from the petite blonde standing beside her and placed both goblets on the small coffee table. As she pulled Samantha close and leaned down, two small fingers traced the outline of her lips.

"Before we go any further . . ."

"Yes?"

"You made me walk around the entire day after telling me we were going on a vacation and then left me hanging without a clue as to where or when. It's bartering time." Irish eyes twinkled as the imp came out to play.

"So what are the stakes and what do I get if I play?" Alex wanted to know.

The small woman practically danced around the taller, making up the rules as she spoke. "I ask a question. If you answer to my satisfaction, I take off a piece of clothing. If not - you do."

Alex picked up her glass of wine and plopped down on the couch. "And . . . you get to say whether or not the question was answered appropriately?"

"Uh, huh."

"Why?"

"Because it's my game."

"I see. Okay . . . ask away." Alex silently counted the amount of apparel and accessories Samantha had on and realized too late that she only had about five articles of clothing to discard whereas Samantha had somewhere in the range of nine. Feeling she was getting the short end of the deal she started to protest but was quickly stopped with the first question.

"So, when are we going on this mini-vacation?"

"I thought we would leave here early in the morning on Friday the 17th."

Smiling blue eyes met green as she challenged Samantha to say she was unsatisfied with the answer. The blonde sat down on the floor and removed one of her sneakers before asking the next question.

"Okay, number two, where are we going?"

"La Jolla to spend some time with my folks." Alex stared at Sam arching a brow, "Next article of clothing."

Another shoe was discarded and placed by its mate.

Samantha thought for a minute. "For how long and what will we do there?"

"One question, one answer, one piece of clothing. No cheating Samantha." Alex grinned at the younger woman who was beginning to think she was not going to get any unsuitable responses from her lover.

Starting to answer the question, Alex tripped over the amount of time they would be spending at her parent's house, she began by almost saying four, caught herself and blurted out, "About, um, ten days."

"Oh, no." Samantha shook her head. "Something was fishy about the beginning of that answer. I'm not convinced you're telling the truth. Off with something Alex."

One leather sandal joined the pair of sneakers by the side of the couch.

"Now - how many days? And I don't have to undress for this one, you need to answer it right."

"You can't just expect me to answer everything . . ." Alex snapped her fingers, "That quickly, Samantha. I have to have time to think."

"Thinking leads to untruths," the small blonde chuckled.

"Truthfully, Samantha, I figure on about 10 days, that includes two weekends. It takes a while to count the days in my head."

"It's that difficult a chore?" came the sarcastic reply.

"Ask the next question." Alex was beginning to tire of this game. She hadn't planned on spending the rest of the evening divulging bits and pieces of what she had in store for the week of Samantha's birthday.

"What will we do down there for 10 days?" Alex could hear the excitement in her lover's lilting voice.

"Let's see, visit, sight see, visit, shop, visit, go to Sea World. Did I say visit?"

A smile flashed across the small blonde's face. She strutted over to the couch and proceeded to straddle Alex's lap.

With faces almost touching and her energy level increasing she leaned toward the dark woman's face. "That sounds like a marvelous vacation, Alex. Who's gonna mind the store?"

"Didn't you forget to do something after that last question, little lady?"

"Oh, yeah." Standing only long enough to strip off the sports socks, followed by the white muslin culottes, Sam reclaimed her seat on Alex's lap.

"There, that's enough for another question," Samantha smiled.

"Well, I have a therapist friend who will fill in for me in the clinic. You know, do the evaluations and cover as therapist in charge. Angel knows most of the patients we now have and can carry on quite well for a week, I'm sure. And, I already talked to Kim about staying at the apartment. She agreed to open in the morning and lock up at night. She even volunteered to kitty sit. Consequently, Rainbow won't have to be alone or put into a kennel. So . . . there you have it. What's my prize?"

Mellifluous soft jazz filled the dimly lit room as Samantha slowly removed the silk blouse covering her sleeveless shirt. She had yet to move from Alex's lap. The older woman could tell Samantha was enjoying tantalizing her with near nakedness. Alex could feel the heat from her lover's legs penetrating her own shorts. There was no way she was going to sit here without totally undressing the nymph before her. She wrapped her arms around the slender body; long

fingers found their way into bikini pants as each of Alex's hands cupped a round, firm buttock simultaneously. She drew her lover closer.

Samantha moaned. Her eyes hazed as she went to that place where only Alex could take her. Her dark angel reached from behind, one muscular arm stretching to its length, moving between the buttocks and continuing toward to the front of her lover's body, searching and finding the soft wet center that ached to be explored. Samantha buried her face in Alex's shoulder and gently bit the skin at the base of her lover's neck then nibbled her way up to Alex's chin, continuing up to eagerly awaiting lips.

Without breaking the passion of the kiss, Alex rose from the couch, small arms encircling her neck and legs wrapping around her waist. She practically floated into the bedroom with her precious bundle in her arms. Promises of deeds to be done were whispered into the well-formed ear at mouth level. All thoughts of any moments beyond the ones they were now living were erased or placed in limbo for safe keeping. "I love you, Samantha." Alex crooned as she placed her lover on the bed and joined her. "It's been quite a busy day. The long weekend will not go to waste - that I can guarantee."

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Cursing the inner alarm that had never learned to differentiate between weekday, weekend, or holiday, Alex awoke as the first rays of light entered the bedroom. She knew the naked beauty beside her would sleep a good two hours more if left undisturbed and even though the thought of awakening her with kisses was more than tempting, she had no intention of spoiling Samantha's days off. The small blonde fought with herself each workday morning to rise and did her damndest to shine. The early morning to late night routine they had found themselves falling into was not an easy one for Samantha, but she seldom complained as she struggled to keep pace with the seasoned executive who was used to early mornings, late nights and little sleep.

On Alex's mind right now was the invitation she needed to extend to her lover to attend a Labor Day party at Angel's on Sunday. She knew the two were barely on speaking terms when not negotiating business, but she felt that schmoozing with the personable Italian would be good for the morale of everyone involved, including Samantha. She hated watching the way the small blonde reacted to the olive-skinned brunette. Angel was the only person in the Center who did not honestly receive Samantha's charm and friendship.

Perhaps if they did something special together today it would be easier to introduce the invitation later on this evening. Maybe after dinner and a movie the proposition would be more palatable. Alex wasn't sure, but she felt if she handled the offer delicately, Samantha would have no recourse but to agree to the outing.

Gently she untangled herself from the caring arms that had surrounded her throughout her dreams. A kiss placed on the Sam's forehead elicited a slight smile on the slumbering woman's face as Alex rolled quietly out of bed and tiptoed into the bathroom. She turned to watch as her sleeping beauty grabbed the pillow with the essence of Obsession permeating it and curled up in a tight ball, hiding her eyelids from the penetrating rays of the morning sun.

Rainbow scurried into the bathroom for her ritual rub, and the dark-haired woman picked the kitten up to keep her from leaving the bathroom and pouncing on the bed. *It wouldn't do to have you be the cause of the princess awakening too early, not that a small creature like you could awaken Our sleeping princess.* Alex chuckled inwardly as she reminisced over the old fairytale about a princess who could not sleep on even a mountain of mattresses if there was a pea under the very last of them. That certainly was not true in Samantha's case. Alex had never seen anyone who could fall asleep as quickly and as deeply as Sam could - as well as being able to accomplish the feat under almost any circumstances.

The kitten she held, though having grown since the night she was found, could still curl up and rest safely in the palm of one of Alex's large, strong hands. She held Rainbow up to her face and nestled her nose in the soft midnight-colored fur. "You're almost as spoiled as your Mommy, do you know that?" She whispered to the fur-baby as she rubbed eagerly awaiting ears. "Come on, let's go feed you and brew me some tea."

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Cascading light filled the entire room and began to slowly drench the apartment in eye squinting brightness, as early morning found its way to maturation. The sound of the air conditioner kicking on as the temperature continued to rise with the sun broke the silence of the room. Last night's newspaper lay strewn across the floor in front of the couch as Alex consumed section after section. Searching the room for something useful to do, she reached for one of her "how-to" books. She had put it aside weeks ago when Samantha came into her life, and up until this very moment she had not found the time to return to what used to be one of her more time consuming pastimes.

The flush of the toilet sounded like an alarm in the quiet apartment. The dark beauty smiled, knowing how Samantha loved to sneak up on her. Alex placed the book on her face in a mock gesture of having fallen back to sleep while reading and waited for her prankster to appear.

Almost silent movements could be heard breaching the space between the bedroom and the living room as the recently awakened blonde tiptoed toward the couch.

Samantha's fragrance betrayed her close proximity to the 'tall drink of water' stretched out on the oversized couch. Without batting an eyelid, Alex allowed the book to be gently pried from her hands, but she could not control the involuntary appearance of love bumps beginning to cover her body as sweet breath tickled the hair follicles on the side of her face near her ear. Just as Samantha was about to place a kiss on the perfectly formed lobe, Alex changed her head positioning and caught the lips squarely with her own, her hands coming to rest on either side of her angel's face.

"Good morning, princess," she mumbled.

"I thought you were sleeping," Samantha replied, surprise in her voice.



"Shows what thought did." Long arms helped position the smaller body on top of her own. "Glad you finally decided to join the land of the living; I thought you were going to sleep right through this gorgeous day."

"Alex, it's only 9:30! It's still early enough to go out for breakfast."

"Oh, but then I'd have to share you with the rest of the world and I have no intention of doing that today. If you're hungry, I'll cook - consider yourself a love-hostage."

"Pancakes?"

"Pancakes it is. But I, unlike the restaurant, will give you the total expense of your meal before you even receive it."

"And what would be the cost of a pancake breakfast this lovely morning?"

Dazzling blue eyes glistened as they bore deeply into sea-green pools, "Ah, let me think. The cost of breakfast . . . don't want to scare the customer away." She smiled seductively, her legs intertwining with those of the body that lay atop of her as she turned the two of them to lay side-by-side on the couch. "I know you must be starving so . . . nourishment for the body and then nourishment for the heart. You consume my food and I, in turn, get to devour you." A questioning look threw the finality of the agreement back to Samantha.

"Sounds like a fair enough price," the blonde smiled impishly. "Yeah, I'll sell my body for a pancake breakfast."

"By the Goddess you're easy," Alex chuckled as they sealed the agreement with a kiss.

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Breakfast strips, juice, and many pancakes later it was decided that the day would be spent only in the company of each other. Samantha suggested a picnic on the beach, and since they both wanted to take advantage of the sun, Alex agreed to postpone Samantha's paying for breakfast until later in the evening.

The mess from the morning meal didn't take long to clean up, but Samantha found it difficult to concentrate on lunch with breakfast still digesting in her stomach. Alex made herself busy after changing into her bathing suit by rummaging through one of the storage rooms and some unpacked boxes. Her quest did not leave her empty handed. Grinning broadly she waltzed back into the kitchen and deposited a picnic basket on the counter.

"I knew this old thing would come in handy one day. Mom, rotic that she is, insisted I take it when I left home to remind me of the beach picnics we used to have when I was little. I've carted it from place to place and this is the first time it's ever been put to use."

Samantha stared blankly at her lover, "Did you call your mom a 'Rotic'?"

"Yep, that's what I said," her full lips curling into a teasing smile.

"Okay, I'll bite. What in the name of Hades does 'Rotic' mean?"

"Oh, but that is so easy, Bard of mine, I would have thought you clever enough to figure it out."

"Well, I'm not, so would you please educate me?" Samantha hated to feel stupid, she blushed when she felt stupid, and she could feel the red beginning to spread from the base of her neck up into her face.

Alex stepped closer and let one arm drape over a small shoulder, her free hand tilting Samantha's face toward hers. "Rotic, my Destiny, is romantic sans the 'man'." She bent down and kissed Samantha's soft, partially opened lips, "And I believe you are one, also," she mumbled, her lips barely leaving Sam's.

"That is so your mother!" Samantha pulled away laughing. "She coined that term didn't she?"

"I couldn't tell you for certain, but I do know she's the first person I ever heard use it."

"Well, I'll be sure to thank her for the basket and for the new word when we go down to visit." She began gathering the ingredients she had already finished with and started putting them in the basket. "I won't be but a few more minutes."

"Take your time, I've got a couple things to take down first," Alex informed Samantha as she opened the freezer and pulled out a package of batteries. She kissed the small blonde on the cheek and exited toward the elevator where she had left the rest of the treasures she had unearthed while looking for the basket.

Alex called to Sam as she re-entered the apartment minutes later. "You just about ready to Rock 'N Roll?"

A bikini clad Samantha came traipsing out of the bedroom, towels in hand.

"No need for those, Honey, I've got everything but the picnic basket already down on the beach.

Alex spotted the wine skin lying beside the basket and chided her lover, "So, is it your plan to get me intoxicated and then seduce me?"

"Gee, do I need to get you intoxicated to do that?" The small blonde grinned. "I must confess, Alex, it's been ages since I've put together a picnic lunch and of course this one was made a little more difficult because nothing really sparked my appetite with us just having eaten."

"I'm sure whatever you decided on will be more than adequate by the time we're hungry," Alex assured, her hand reaching the handle of the basket before Samantha's. "I'll get this. You ready?"

"Couldn't be any readier."

Alex threw the wine skin over her shoulder, took the basket in one hand, and let her other arm drape over her lover's shoulder. "Shall we go have fun?"

"By all means."

Samantha's breath caught in her throat, as she left the air conditioned building for the heated atmosphere the Santa Ana had brought to the California coast. "I didn't realize it was so warm out here - this is great swimming weather."

As they walked toward the beach, Alex was carefully watching her lover's face to see what Samantha's expression would be when she spotted the scene that Alex had so carefully laid out on the shore below. The dark-haired beauty was by no means disappointed. Samantha's face began to beam when she first caught glimpse of the 'rotic' setting her lover had mapped out on the deserted stretch of sand.

Along with the picnic basket, Alex had unearthed, a portable CD player, whose batteries had long ago died and she had quickly replenished, a beach umbrella, and a couple beach chaises. She had gone into the bedroom and brought down Samantha's journal and pen. It had come to her attention that Sam had not been writing in it as often as she had before the incident with her father had occurred, and Alex was hoping that today might be a turning point in getting her to write again.

Samantha looked up at her lover, a mist covering her sea-green eyes, "Oh, Alex this is so special."

"I'm glad you like it, Honey. Even Mother Nature seems to have gone out of her way to paint us a picture perfect day."

A few miles up the beach the atmosphere was one of parties and crowds, but here on their own small stretch of paradise, the tone was that of quiet relaxation.

Alex put the basket down and the two headed for the sea. Scorching sand was replaced by cool wet as the lover's began entering the welcoming water that was lapping at their feet. Exceedingly warm winds had heated even the cool Pacific to a tepid temperature, making it a marvelous day to re-acquaint themselves with the mer.

The busy weeks they had just left behind them had allowed little time for the luxury of basking in the sun, by the time most evenings rolled around, the duo had been too exhausted to take even a leisurely stroll down the shoreline. They more often than not opted to spend those precious twilight moments wrapped in each other's arms on something soft and comfortable.

The water was welcoming and warm, but still cooler than the air. As they swam Alex's mind digressed to the past couple weeks.

She had kept the promise she had made to herself to return to her exercise regime, using the gym mostly on nights when Samantha was taking her Tae Kwon Do lessons. On nights when the

perky blonde didn't have class, the ritual had become one of the two of them practicing together. Any time they shared only intensified the still growing relationship.

The climbing wall had become another duo attraction in the after clinic hours. It seemed as though the martial arts lessons were increasing the smaller woman's agility, and soon she was almost able to keep up with Alex as her increased flexibility allowed her to scurry from grip to grip, making small quick moves as opposed to her lover's longer more calculated advances.

Samantha closed her eyes while swimming beside her lover and brought back the carefully planned scene Alex had set before her on the beach. One of the first articles to catch her eye had been her journal, which her lover had strategically placed in the middle of the blanket. Samantha's mind drifted back to the day Cassandra had instigated all the trouble between her and her father. That night when she had thought about relieving some of her grief into her writings she had, for the first time in years, been unable to put down on paper any of her intense feelings. Even now she was still having a difficult time trying to understand how one human being could harbor so much hate for another. There was a see-saw in her mind's eye with Cassandra on one end and her father on the other. Samantha was puzzled by the two of them and trying to understand their hatred had turned her flow of creativity to stone.

She tried her best not to bombard Alex with her loss, but the destruction had gone deeper than anyone looking at or talking to the vivacious blonde would ever realize.

Samantha was sure that even Alex thought it strange that she was taking the separation so well, but she didn't know how else to handle it, except to act like she wasn't being torn apart inside. Losing the love of her father because of her love for Alex made her physically ill at times and to make matters worse she hadn't spoken to her mother since the incident.

The only glimmer of light on the situation, other than Samantha having Alex to lean on, had to be the fact that her sister, Sally, had turned out to be more of an anchor for her sister than anyone ever would have given the young woman credit for being. Sally called Samantha weekly and kept the disowned daughter up-to-date on affairs of the family. Ironically, the split between father and daughter had brought the sisters closer together.

The small blonde opened her eyes to find the love of her life floating close by, also drifting on her back and staring into the vastness of the blue above them, totally lost in her own world of thought. A gentle touch on the arm brought the dark-haired beauty back to the present and the two frolicked together for a while longer in the liquid playground.

They were searching the ocean before them for a large swell to ride when Alex noticed that the pale skin on the top of Samantha's shoulders had begun to redden. She insisted they retreat from the water to the safety of the umbrella. Neither of the women wanted the entire weekend ruined by easily avoided sunburn. Catching a final wave they rode it out to its destination and proceeded inland, hand-in-hand back to the blanket and protective shade.

When they reached their small beach haven, Alex lavishly spread sunscreen on pink shoulders that were already becoming tender. Samantha, in turn, insisted on putting a small amount of the

lotion on the already tanning body of her lover. Then the two of them stretched horizontally on the blanket to bask in the warmth of old Sol. Alex suggested that the small blonde lay within the realm of shadow, while she languished in the sun's rays, a bronze hue appearing on her tall, slender form. One long, muscular arm found its way across the smaller body beside it and before they had even realized they were the two women fell into a light sleep.

Samantha awoke, when her body sensed the absence of weight across her waist. She quickly spotted the tall figure rhythmically swaying to a beat of her own, oblivious to eyes lovingly watching her. Sam sat up cross-legged on the blanket as the unseasonable warmth of the sea breeze countered the chilling thoughts that had begun floating through her mind. She had been dreaming before the subconscious reality of Alex not being by her side had awakened her. Her dream had been of the conflict that had been waged on this very beach a little over a month ago. Now she found herself lost in the chaos of opposing emotions as she picked up the small black ledger with the silver unicorn embossed on the cover and her favorite pen. It had been weeks since she had tried to put onto paper the confusion and thoughts of despair lurking in the hidden recesses of her mind.

With the assistance of nature's gentle roar, soft New Age music coming from the CD player, and the combination of sun, sand and sea, her pent up creativity slowly began to seep out into her consciousness. She sat quietly, her verdant eyes misting again as she took in the beauty surrounding her. Love was an arm's length from her, practicing the graceful movements of an ancient Oriental discipline. The wind was embracing her with a warm hug and the sea was singing to her soul. The chip of ice that had been firmly lodged in a corner of her heart since that day so many weeks before suddenly began to melt, and the thoughts of the poet began to once again flow from her mind, through the pen, and onto the stark white paper. Copious words - words that had been locked in a dark closet since that fateful day, rushed from her mind to the pen in her hand as she began filling page after page of the small ledger. Time stood still, allowing the young bard to vent via the only vehicle she had ever been able to use.

A soft touch of a hand on her shoulder, as Alex knelt down beside her brought the fair-haired beauty back to the here and now.

"Earth to Samantha." Alex smiled down getting her lover's attention. "I know this is your line but . . . I'm starving. Are you ready to eat?"

The small blonde looked up into azure pools, "Of course I'm ready to eat. I was just sitting here waiting for an invitation."

"Uh, huh," came the incredulous reply. "Just like you always do."

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The remainder of the afternoon had disappeared before they had realized it. Alex had suggested playing some beach games. Samantha sat waiting on the blanket while Alex ran back up to the apartment. Within minutes she came scrambling back down the stairs, a Frisbee in one hand, Rainbow in the other. She put the small black fur-baby down on the blanket and watched as the

kitten hopped onto the sand and began digging holes. The two women watched with amusement as the tiny animal wore herself out and then scurried onto the blanket, under the protection and shadow of the large umbrella. Exhaustion overcame Rainbow and she slept, while her mistresses played child-like games on the beach. Content as only a day on the beach can make a person, the consensus of the two lovers was to not re-enter the water but instead to go rent some videos, have a nice relaxing bath and a leisurely dinner and then to kick back and watch movies.

The decision had made Samantha one happy lady as she had been raised on films, movie stars, and live theater. When she and her sister were younger, Sheila would take them to the early bird show on Friday after school, before their dad arrived home. As they got older, one night a week was always 'girl's night out' at the cinema or at a live performance. Movie and theater going were the only events Don permitted his wife to attend alone with the girls, other than occasional shopping trips. While Samantha was still in high school, her father had decided to treat the three Riley women to a long weekend in New York City. Don was attending a sales seminar and figured it would be the ideal time for 'the girls' to take in their first Broadway play. Her mother had ordered the tickets ahead of time and mother and daughters were able to attend one of the earlier performances of what turned out to be one of the longest running shows on Broadway. Samantha still smiled when she thought about the unforgettable memory of walking into the Winter Garden Theater to see her all time favorite musical - 'Cats'.

Since moving to Laguna Sam could only remember going to the movies once and that was with Suz. She had not been to a live performance in over a year and she missed the forms of entertainment that had sustained her through her childhood. Several times she had hinted that going to a movie might be a nice evening out, but Alex always supplied her with one excuse or another. Her partner's favorite reason for avoiding the movie theaters was that she liked silence when she watched a film and didn't want to have to deal with other people, laughing, talking, or making eating sounds. Sam had to agree that some of the extraneous sounds in a dark theater could be quite distracting, but that would have never stopped her from going.

For most couples going to a movie was part of the courting process, but tonight was the first time for the two lovers and Samantha was delighted. Alex got a kick out of watching the blonde's exuberance as the small woman stood in front of the rows of covers, carefully choosing which films she wanted to see first and changing her mind with every two or three picks. As much as Samantha had hated not going to the movies, the plus side turned out to be that all the new releases at the video store were pictures neither of the women had seen.

Since they had until Tuesday to return their choices, Samantha cajoled and pleaded until they ended up getting four. There was no way the dark-haired woman was going to tell Samantha four were too many because she intended for them to spend most of Sunday at Angel's. Perhaps giving in to two "chick flicks", a horror story, and a thriller would put her in enough good light that getting Sam to agree to the party would not be too difficult.

It was decided that dinner would be pizza, salad, and Dos Equis. Alex phoned in the order from the video store, knowing full well it would take Samantha an eternity to make up her mind deciding which four she wanted to see.

Finally, with pizza, beer, and videos in hand, the two women returned to the warehouse.

"I'll make some popcorn later when we get hungry again, it'll be fun." Samantha smiled on the ride up to the penthouse.

"Hungry again! We haven't even eaten the pizza yet, what makes you think we'll be hungry, again?" Of course she already knew the answer, but the tall brunette could not help but tease.

"No one can sit through more than one movie without wanting popcorn."

"Who sits through more than one movie at a time?"

"Ever heard of a 'double feature'?"

"Ah, I think I remember reading about those in an old flick magazine." Alex did her best to keep a solemn face.

"Either you're pulling my leg, Alexis Dorian, or your mothers raised you funny. Everyone's been to a double feature at least once."

"Funny, ha ha, or funny queer?"

"Alex!" Samantha walked into the living room and placed the videos on the VCR.

Alex plopped the pizza next to the oven and the beer into the fridge. She walked over and tickled the small blonde. "What? Queer? You have a problem with the word Queer?"

"It's just such . . . Alex . . . I can't talk when you . . ."

"Samantha, it's just a word like any other. I kind of think it sets us apart from the rest of the sheep. And have you ever looked it up?"

"No, I can't say that I have. Okay, Ms. Smarty, I'm sure you have or you wouldn't have asked, so . . ."

"Okay. Well you know the obvious definition so we can disregard that one." She stood in front of her lover looking down into soft green eyes, as she draped an arm over each small shoulder.

"The positive synonyms are eccentric, unconventional, and even obsessed. I resemble all those, how about you?"

She smiled and kissed Samantha on the cheek. "I am unquestionably eccentric, you can ask anyone who has known me for more than a day. Unconventional - I would say we both resemble that one and . . . obsessed . . ."

Alex leaned slowly down until her lips caressed her lover's ear. One adroit finger, barely touching her lover's skin, ran the contour of the angelic face before her as she whispered softly, "I definitely have my obsession."

Samantha found her knees beginning to buckle as Alex continued seducing her with words and deeds. Long, sinewy fingers traveled down her neck while an experienced tongue traced the outer edges of her ear that tasted ever so slightly of salt. The dark woman continued whispering words of adoration into her lover's ear, her breath evoking love bumps which quickly covered the length of the small frame she was caressing with her voice.

"Yes, my Destiny," Alex began her assertion, "I am most assuredly '*mildly insane, touched, absorbed or interested to an extreme or unreasonable degree*' in my obsession and we both know who that is."

The kiss became passionate as long and short fingers vied with each other to be the first to remove the beach robe from the body in front of them. Bathing suits quickly went the same route as the robes. Dinner, bath, movies, beer . . . all were forgotten as four legs lost the will to remain erect and two bodies found the floor. Consumed with a hunger that could only be quenched by the touch, the taste, and the feel of each other, the lovers, true to the definition of the five-letter-word that began with "Q", found themselves obsessed with each other.

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With the urgency of immediate desire spent, they remained intertwined and totally content to linger there forever, that is until a small gurgling sound emanated from Samantha's stomach.

She giggled as the sound reproduced itself, only louder.

"I guess it's time to feed the monster and watch a movie," she apologetically announced.

Alex watched as the smaller woman stood and stretched, her naked form highlighted by the lunar illumination cascading into the room. From where Alex now sat Samantha appeared superimposed onto the ocean, a sea-nymph glimmering in the moonlight, dancing on the water - truly a vision to behold.

The fantasy was extinguished when the small blonde, chilled from leaving the warmth of her lover's arms, went in search of a nightshirt.

When Samantha re-entered the living room, on her way to the kitchen, Alex asked if she could lend a hand. Rising to her full height from her position on the floor, the dark woman shook off the unusual illusion still remaining in her mind's eye . . . *Samantha's imagination must be rubbing off on me - sea-nymphs, please Alex!*

"Here, Samantha, let me help you," she repeated the suggestion and started toward the kitchen, also.



"No, I can warm the pizza," Sam countered, rejecting the offer of assistance. "But, you might want to grab a nightshirt and cover that body of yours so I can concentrate on the movies we rented." She winked at the dark-haired beauty now standing just a few feet from her.

"And if I chose to remain like this," Alex spun slowly, the magnet of temptation challenging the smaller woman to a re-enactment of the past hour.

Samantha closed her eyes and slowly shook her head, continuing toward the kitchen. "No, Alex. It's show-time and I mean movie show-time, not Alex show-and-touch-time. You can have a repeat a little later, but right now my stomach is insisting on sustenance."

"Well, if you're going to be a party pooper . . ."

"Nightshirt, my darling, then you can put the movie in if you want, and get it past all those damn previews and commercials, please."

Ten minutes later they were sitting in front of the television, eating and watching the first of the films Samantha had picked out.

The pizza box was soon empty, as were a few bottles of beer. Night was beginning to seep into early morning as the lover's snuggled, partially reclining on the comfortable sofa with Samantha snuggled between Alex's strong, muscular legs, her back to the taller woman, and her head resting cozily on her lover's chest. Rainbow had made a nest for herself on the pillow that had been thrown on the floor next to the couch, and the little family of three was all tucked in for the evening.

As the credits began to roll, signifying the conclusion the first movie, true to her word, Samantha insisted it was popcorn time. She pleaded with Alex to sit through "just one more" when the lanky brunette had wearily suggested they call it a morning and go to bed.

In actuality, Alex knew she would never make it through a second film, she had barely made it through the first. Her parents had probably never taken her to a 'double feature' because neither the girl she had been nor the woman she had become was in the least bit interested in movies; physical activities had always been far more appealing and her views on the subject had not altered through time. She would rather be on the volleyball court or in a martial arts competition than sitting quietly in a dark room with people play acting on the screen. But for Samantha, she would try her damndest to stay awake.

As the second film began, it was Alex's turn to get comfortable. They traded positions and Sam extended the recliner at the end of the sofa to enable her to stretch out her legs, allowing ample room for Alex's head to rest in the welcoming lap. Caressing fingers gently massaged the scalp under thick dark hair, occasionally extending to the taller woman's neck and shoulders. Within minutes Alex drifted off, stirring only when Samantha fidgeted. She had been in a rather long stretch of sleep when suddenly the small blonde jerked and let out a gasp.

"What? What's wrong? Did you hear something?" Alex panicked in reaction to Samantha's utterance and quick movement.

Samantha looked down into blinking, sleep filled eyes - eyes that had widened with alarm as the abruptly awakened sleeper started to get up.

"Down girl!" Samantha grinned at her disheveled lover. "You've been asleep, haven't you? I thought the idea was to watch the film together? This is a horror movie and . . ."

"I'm sorry, Honey, I just got so damn comfortable lying here with you rubbing my head . . ."

"It's okay, Alex, the movie's not that good anyway. Come on it's really late, let's go to bed."

"Are you sure, I'll try to stay wake until the end if you want to watch it."

"Nah, I'd rather snuggle than get scared." She nudged a now hesitant Alex, who was displaying a guilty conscious, to get up.

*Great, now you've done it . . . up until this point there was every indication that she would go along with whatever you had planned for tomorrow - rather today, but now . . . now you went and fell asleep when you were supposed to be watching a movie with her! "Just great," she mumbled almost inaudibly.*

"Did you say something, Alex?"

"I said . . . you're just great for not getting mad at me for falling asleep."

"Don't be silly. It's just a stupid movie. At least you were there for something to hold onto." Samantha threw a loving glance in Alex's direction as she carted the popcorn bowl and glasses into the kitchen. "You go ahead in, I'll be right there."

"Okay, I'll turn off the TV and VCR."

Normally Alex would have had no problem staying awake, but the combination of sun, ocean, fun and making love, topped off with food and beer, and followed by nestling and a massage - who wouldn't have fallen asleep? She came out of the bathroom just as Samantha entered the bedroom. Sam hadn't noticed the slogan on Alex's nightshirt earlier in the evening when she had first put it on, but it now struck her as rather humorous.

"I don't believe you're wearing a shirt that states, 'I Don't Do Mornings'." The small blonde burst into laughter.

"Is that ever the wrong shirt for you! You need one that states, 'I Don't Do Nights'. The one you have on ought to be my shirt!"

"You know," Alex replied, taking the shirt off and carrying it over to her lover. "You are absolutely right."

Night had always been Sam's favorite part of the day and now, standing in their bedroom with a stark-naked Alex bewitching her, an oversized T-shirt dangling from the long outstretched arm, that thought rang truer than ever before. If there was anything on the young blonde's mind as she ran her eyes leisurely down the full length of her lover's voluptuous body, it certainly wasn't sleep.

Ignoring the proffered piece of clothing, she stepped closer to the tall beauty and trailed her fingers down the well-defined muscles of the extended arm.

Alex dropped the nightshirt and bent to grasp the hem of Samantha's shirt as she pulled it up over the smaller woman's head. She drew Samantha close to her and nuzzled her face into the golden crown, taking in the sweet fragrance that was typically Samantha.

Never losing touch they walked over to the bed, and for the second time that day, or rather the first time that morning, lost themselves in a world of sense, touch, passion and love. Speed was a word that belonged in this world about as much as sleep did. Alex made love to Samantha, who in turn made love to Alex, who reciprocated yet another time before totally exhausting her lover. Tears of joy ran down the smaller woman's face as she searched for the words to express her feelings. "By the Gods Alex, I love you," was probably the first complete sentence Samantha had uttered in over an hour.

"I love you too, my Destiny." Alex retorted as she kissed away the happy tears and rolled onto her back, giving Samantha room to get into her favorite position.

"Alex, you make me feel marvelous. I wonder if everyone who's in love feels this way."

"Speaking of other people . . ." Alex interjected, quickly changing the subject, ". . . how would you like to go to a party tomorr. . . today?"

"What kind of party?"

"A Labor Day party, remember . . . the holiday?"

"Right. Who's giving the party?"

"Angel, she figured Sunday would be better than Monday so people wouldn't be going to work with hangovers, she . . ."

"When did she ask you, Alex?"

"Oh, Samantha . . . she invited Us on Friday, while you were busy putting up decorations."

"And you waited until Sunday morning to discuss it with me?"

"You know, I could have sworn we just finished making love and now . . ."

"Alex, why didn't you ask me sooner?"

The taller woman sighed, a slight grimace forming on her face. "Because, Samantha, I was afraid of having This conversation. Look, I didn't know how to say no, so I kind of promised we'd make an appearance. She even invited Marcy and her friend up from San Diego. I know you don't really like Angel, but . . ."

"If you know that, then why did you accept?"

"Because I think it would be good for you and Angel to associate with each other outside the Center for a change. Tell you what, if you're not having fun after . . . oh, after an hour, then we'll thank Angel for inviting us and leave."

"Alex . . ."

"Come on Samantha, be a sport. What's an hour? I sat through two movies tonight for you."

"No, actually you didn't. You sat through one and perhaps half of another."

"But . . . I was willing to sit through both of them." Alex gave her a pouting look, her blue eyes taking on a sad puppy-like appearance.

"Well . . . I will admit you've done you damnedest to do everything right up to this point today so I would have no recourse . . ."

"That's not fair, Samantha." Alex objected. "This entire day was not built around asking you that question." But she smiled realizing that part of what her angel was saying was absolutely true. A lifetime of dealing with Sam was not going to be easy, but it would always be interesting.

The lunar light captured the sparkle in green eyes as Samantha smiled up at her lover. "Okay, Alex . . . one hour and if I'm miserable . . . we leave . . . deal?"

"Absolutely!"

Alex squeezed Samantha tight, a sigh of relief whistling through her pursed lips.

"Oh, come on - it wasn't that difficult, now was it?"

"No, I confess, I was too anxious to ask earlier, I didn't want to argue with you, but waiting only made it more complex as the day went on." Azure eyes stared up at the ceiling. "You know, Samantha, I've never before had the least bit of turmoil when I wanted to, or thought I should do something. This is probably the first time I've ever felt as though I am not totally in control of my life . . . I don't mean that in a bad way, just that things feel really different when you stop and consider someone else's feelings all the time."

"I'm sorry if I made asking about going to the party a chore, Alex. I'll try to give her a second . . ."

Alex looked down and tenderly tilted Samantha's face so their eyes would meet. "It's just that all of my life, even when I thought I was in love with someone, if there was something I wanted to do - what they wanted always came second. With you my priorities are reversed." She kissed Sam gently, "I love you more than you know."

"I love you, too, Alex. Today was fabulous." She paused trying to gather her thoughts before speaking again. "You know... the wall that stands between my dad and me has actually been years in the making. I never wanted to face that before. Cassie's little episode only hastened a situation that was well on its way to happening, and our love was merely the last brick to be mortared into place. I haven't wanted to face that or to even talk about it and you've given me the space I've needed to heal. You don't know how much I appreciate that, Alex."

The dark woman started to speak but Samantha gently hushed her. "I actually did some writing today, thanks to your taking my journal down to the beach. I need to thank you for that." Her eyes teared as she thought about the release she had felt when some of her thoughts became viewable. She swallowed the lump that had suddenly appeared in her throat.

Alex wiped away a tear as it trickled down the angelic face. "You don't have to thank me, Samantha, I . . ."

"Yes . . . yes I do, Alex. I've never had to face a pain like the one Cassandra set into motion. Not that I wouldn't have had to face it sooner or later, but she forced the situation to an untimely eruption."

Alex started to place her fingers on Samantha's mouth to quiet the words that brought tears, and to stop the pain from spewing forth from lips that had just seconds ago been speaking of their day in the sun and evening of fun.

Samantha grasped the strong, yet gentle hand of her lover and kissed it. "No, Alex. I need to say this. None of what I'm saying negates one second of the time we spent together today. Actually, it intensifies it. I've never had anyone to share my truly intimate feelings with before, my writing has always been my solace - now I have you, as well."

She buried her head deep in her lover's chest. A barely audible, "I love you, my hero," escaped from her lips.

"I love you, too, Samantha. We have a busy day ahead of us; I think some sleep would do us both a lot of good." She tenderly kissed the top of her lover's head. "Sweet dreams, Samantha."

"Sweet dreams to you, too, Alex."

Continued in Part 2.

## ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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### Part 2

#### Chapter 2

For the third time in fifteen minutes, Alex shook the sleeping blonde, her patience beginning to wear a bit thin.

"Samantha, it's almost 10 and we have to be at Angel's by noon."

"What time does it start?" Samantha whined, not opening her eyes to avoid being bombarded with sunshine. "Do we have to be the first ones there?"

"It's starts at noon and I hate being late."

Another nasally whine was heard coming from the direction of pouting lips. "Haven't you ever heard of being 'fashionably late'?"

"As a matter-of-fact I grew up with people all around me who felt that 'fashionably late' was the only way to attend a function and that the party would not be complete until their announced arrival, when all eyes could turn and admire them."

The vindictive tone to her lover's voice jolted the small blonde to a seated position, verdant eyes opened wide for a second as she stared at the dark beauty before her in disbelief.

"What in Tartarus . . ."

"I'm sorry, Samantha," Alex shook her head. "Bad flash-back." She leaned over the bed and placed a hand on Samantha's shoulder. "Listen, Angel invited Marcy and her guest on my behalf. Marcy is usually pretty much always on time and the party starts at noon . . ."

Ignoring the urgency in Alex's voice, Samantha flashed back to the *'fashionably late'* statement. "All what people did you grow up around? You make it sound like you were some kind of debutante." Squinting green slits barely focused in the direction of the contralto voice.

"Samantha Renee Riley, I don't think now is the time to discuss my childhood or my adolescence! If you really don't want to go, I'm not going to fight with you. But I'll tell you right now, I have to make an appearance." She turned and started to walk toward the living room.

"Wait! Okay . . . okay . . . I get the picture. I'm up." Rolling off the bed, she stood, shielding her eyes in a display of mock sun blindness. "Point me in the direction of the shower and push." Levity always seemed to put the smile back on Alex's face and this try was no exception.

"I've already showered so tell you what . . . while you're getting ready I'll make an on-the-run breakfast. We need to stop and get some ice, whatever it is you want to drink and some un-burgers - I'm sure they won't have them at the party."

A hollow sounding reply echoed from the bathroom, "Okay, I'll only be a few minutes."

A few minutes was an understatement when it came to how long it was actually going to take Samantha to get ready. From the vicinity of the bedroom Alex could hear various moans and groans of displeasure, followed by drawers being opened and closed. Sam seemed to be having a difficult time deciding what it was she wanted to wear. Finally an exasperated Alex tore into the bedroom.

"What is your problem, Samantha? This is not the most important social event of the season and you've never had trouble dressing yourself before."

"I always have a problem picking out clothes, this time it's just more noticeable. I don't want to look frumpy."

Irritation transformed into laughter. "That's ludicrous, Samantha! I never in my wildest imaginings dreamed you would react like this."

"React like what?" Samantha spit back at her, taking offense to the flippancy Alex was applying to the situation. "You think I'm ludicrous because I want to look good?"

"What's ludicrous is that you could even begin to imagine yourself as looking 'frumpy'. So . . . tell me . . . what's the real problem?" Alex arched an eyebrow, her smile disappeared and she stared intently at the blonde standing in front of her. "The truth, Samantha."

"I just want to look . . ."

"No, no, no. There's more to it than that. What the Hell is wrong with you?" Alex's voice raised an octave in tone. "This is so unlike you, Samantha."

"Okay, okay. I guess I just want to look better than Angel will . . . there . . . I said it. Does that make you happy?" Involuntary tears began to fill the sea-green eyes and spill down the small woman's cheeks.

"Samantha . . . Honey . . . what can you be thinking? You don't have to compete with Angel. Come here." Alex took the smaller woman into her arms, soothingly stroking her head. "There's no competition Samantha, none. Don't put yourself through this and don't put me through it." She tilted her lover's head for their eyes to meet. "Would it help if I swore to you that Angel is not even my 'type'?"

"Could you swear that?"

"Could I? Damn Samantha. Do I need to add courses in self-confidence to our agenda here at the Center? Absolutely I could swear that Angel is not my type. Go!" She turned the blonde around and marched her into the bathroom. "Look in the mirror!" Standing regally behind her partner, she continued, "Look - see that pale face in the mirror, the one dotted with angel kisses? See the soft green eyes and hair the color of sunshine?"

"Y - e - s." Samantha slowly responded.

"That's my type! I see no dark eyes, no dark hair, and no olive-colored skin looking back at me. But it is most definitely the face of an angel - My Irish Angel." She turned the sobbing woman back around and held her closely. "Do I really need to say anything more?"

"You could say, '*Samantha wipe your stupid face and get ready or we'll be late*.'" The sparkle was back in the brilliant green eyes as the last of the tears dried on her face.

"I don't have to say it, you already did." Alex kissed the woman she wanted to spend the rest of her life with and hoped to the Goddess that someday Samantha would trust completely that she meant what she said. She knew she had to take into consideration that this was Samantha's first intimate relationship and a life-changing one at that. She even realized there would be various



stages the newly outed lesbian would probably go through. Nevertheless, she hated playing these 'do you really love me games'. She played them what seemed like a lifetime ago and there was no desire to have a rerun.

Before walking out of the bedroom Alex opened one of Samantha's drawers, and picked out a daisy print camisole, she opened another and got a pair of white linen shorts. The self-appointed clothing coordinator threw the apparel on the bed and voiced in the direction of the bathroom, "Your clothing is laid out, Madame. I'll meet you downstairs in the garage."

Minutes later, Samantha walked into the garage to find Alex checking water, oil, and washer levels.

"Guess I need to take her in for a checkup before we drive down to Mom's."

"That's always a good idea before taking a trip," Samantha agreed.

"You ready?"

"Yeah, thanks to the help of my wardrobe mistress."

"Okay, let's get started."

Food and beverage shopping didn't take very long and Alex pulled the Boxster up in front of Angel's studio apartment by 11:57. She grabbed the cooler containing the ice, drinks and un-burgers out of the trunk, while Samantha retrieved the canvas bag holding their swimsuits, sunscreen, and towels.

"Are you satisfied, Alex? We're made it here before noon."

A long tanned arm reached out and encompassed the waist of the questioner. The tall woman bent down and whispered softly into a perfectly shaped ear. "I'm happy we're here early. I'm overjoyed there's a smile on your face. And, in case you don't realize it, you look beautiful."

Samantha tingled as her body began to react to the gentle touch of her lover's breath. "If you keep that up, you can just go say hi and bye at the same time, because we'll need to go home so you can finish what you're starting." A broad grin appeared as the blonde turned her head to look into playful blue eyes. "This little gathering has exactly one hour to make me glad I showed up, right?"

"Indubitably! You're not in a party mood one hour from this very minute and we're outta here."

Offering Samantha her free arm the two strolled up to the door.

Three feet from the apartment door, they could already hear the music. There was no doubt it was going to be a rowdy affair. The welcome sign on the door bid the guests to "Come On In."

Once inside the women realized that they may have been on time, but they were not the first arrivals. There was a couple standing over by the CD player sifting through the albums and another in the kitchen. Through the back door Samantha spotted Angel out on the deck, seemingly talking to yet another guest. Alex deposited the cooler in the kitchen area and the two went outside to greet their hostess.

"Hey, glad you two could make it." Angel stated as she helped a friend move one of the tables to the edge of the deck to make extra room. The small dark-skinned woman looked as though she had been taking advantage of the flexible hours she was keeping at the Center lately. Most of the therapy clients were arriving either early in the morning and or early in the evening. Samantha noted that the woman's olive-skin was obviously darker than it was a month ago. Angel had no qualms about showing off her shapely figure; she sported only the top of her bathing suit and a pair of faded cutoffs. The petite Italian motioned the two new arrivals over to meet her friend.

"Alex, Samantha - this is Joey, she's up here with Lisa and Jake who are in the kitchen."

Introductions were acknowledged all around as the two from the kitchen made their way out onto the deck. Having reloaded the CD player, the other couple also came out to join the little group. Not being very good at small talk, Alex felt this was as good a time as any to go get a beer and to bring back a wine cooler for Sam.

By the time Alex got back with the drinks, Samantha was engrossed in a literary conversation with Stella, who was doing her graduate work in journalism at San Diego State. They were still talking and sitting on the steps that lead down to the beach when Marcy and her new girl, Von arrived. Sam graciously excused herself from Stella and went to join Alex with her old friend. More than an hour passed and Samantha was having no regrets about letting Alex talk her into coming to the party.

Angel didn't seem to be hanging as closely around Alex as Samantha feared she would, although she did notice the small dark woman staring in Alex's direction from time to time. Of course she needed to take into account that she, herself, was constantly glancing over at Angel.

By 2 o'clock the party was in full swing, between the music and new acquaintances, Samantha had pretty much forgotten about her earlier trepidation. On the other hand, boredom was setting in with one particular, not exceptionally conversational, dark-haired beauty.

"Does anyone other than me think the sand needs a few visitors?" Alex looked around at the bodies peopling the deck. "Volleyball anyone?"

Marcy was the first to respond. "Volleyball sounds great. Hey, Angel, you got a net?"

"Sure do, just a sec and I'll go get it." The small Italian headed off, beer in hand to retrieve the equipment.

Alex darted inside and donned her swimming suit then made sure there was a drink in Samantha's hand before making her way down to the beach to help set up the net and block off the bounds.

Samantha and a few of the less athletic types offered to stock one of the coolers with a variety of the drinks scattered around the kitchen and bring it down to the beach.

In her own element the dark-haired Amazon towered above the rest and out shined them all. She and Marcy were picked to be the captains of opposing teams. As they began dividing the women into teams, Alex did her best not to choose Angel, but it was fairly obvious that the small woman wanted to be on her bosses' squad. Alex didn't want to intentionally hurt the younger woman's feelings. She gave Samantha an *"it's out of my hands"* look and picked the Italian as her last player.

There was no doubt that Alex was in one of her favorite environments as the game began. Samantha watched with pride as her lover served and scored numerous times, obviously one of the best players in the match. She found herself mesmerized, watching the way Alex's muscles rippled as she moved fluidly across the sand. The small blonde had not thought it possible that a human could jump as high or as quickly as her Alex did when she blocked serve after serve. Her grace was unmatched by any of the other players, whether she was jumping or squatting to retrieve and send the ball to its final destination back over the net.

"You Go Alex!" Sam yelled occasionally when a particularly difficult shot was accomplished.

Sporadically, the tall dark-haired figure would glance over at the sidelines and smile in Samantha's direction or shoot one hand high in the air with a short wave before returning her attention to the game.

Even though she preferred being a spectator, Samantha was sure she would have been just as good a player as Angel. The fact was she didn't want her relationship with Alex to become one of competition. She liked the yin/yang tone of their coupling, more of - player/spectator, therapist/paper pusher, cynic/dreamer, reader/writer. There were areas in which they were equal, but each having her own strong points made for a blend of the two distinct personalities, as opposed to being carbon copies of each other.

She cheered again as Alex hit a difficult spike back at Marcy who was a near match in expertise on the other side of the net. The game ended and it was decided the time had come to pay the ocean a little visit.

"Samantha, go get your suit on, Hon, I'm hot," Alex announced, sweat dripping from her ebony hair and streaking down her face, her tanned arms glistening in the afternoon sun.

"You sure are, but I could take care of that . . ." the small blonde answered grinning.

"I'm certain you could, but not Here and not Now," the tall beauty smiled back.

Samantha ran over and handed her lover a beer before climbing the stairs back into the house to change into her bathing suit.

While Samantha was gone, Alex decided to do some people studying, it seemed Angel invited quite a diverse group of friends to this little Labor Day affair. The display of tattoos adorning the bodies of the women present showed a variance in lifestyles, which ranged from militant feminists to surfer gals. She wondered where in the scheme of things Angel placed herself. More than one couple so far arrived on a Harley Davidson and to the opposite extreme, there was an old Woody parked at the end of the street nearest to the beach with surfboards strapped on the roof.

Several surf and body boards were scattered around in the sand near the deck stairs. Alex picked up two of the smaller boards, found the owners and asked permission to use them.

When Samantha came down the steps and back onto the beach she spotted Alex sitting alone, staring out at the ocean, two colorful body boards resting on her lap.

"Whatcha got there, Hon?" Samantha asked as she tapped her lover on the shoulder.

"Body boards, ever ridden one?"

"Can't say that I have - lakes don't have waves and I don't think there's really any use for them without surf."

"Nobody likes a smart ass Samantha." Alex smiled, handing one of the boards to the small blonde. "Here, it's time for your first lesson. These are easy to learn on - I think I got my first board when I was about four."

"What did you do, learn to swim in the womb?" Sam asked sarcastically.

"Practically," Alex admitted. "We did the 'mommy and me' thing in the pool before I learned to walk."

"Damn - I thought I was kidding," Samantha admitted.

"Backfired, huh?" Alex smiled down at the bewildered face of her lover. "Southern Californians - surf is in our blood! Come on Samantha, let's get some sunscreen on those pale shoulders of yours and then go have some fun."

Samantha brought a sun-block that allowed some tanning, so she could acquire at least the semblance of a tan before the summer faded into autumn. She was beginning to get a complex as she looked around at all the golden-brown bodies and realized that she now lived in one of the sunshine states and should probably stop looking like death warmed over. A mental note was etched on her memory to suggest to Alex that they start spending more time on the beach during the daylight hours, before this Indian Summer faded into Fall.

Alex generously applied the sun lotion to lightly freckled shoulders but refused to allow Samantha to do the same on hers.

"Don't need that stuff. I never burn," were her final words on the subject.

"If you burn . . ." Samantha began to protest.

"If I burn, I'll suffer. Trust me, Samantha, I won't burn."

That conversation ended, it was time to head for the water. Alex hadn't been surfing in years and was looking forward to experiencing, again, the thrill that the sport always afforded her. Instead of spending time talking about what to do with the boards, she handed the more colorful of the two to Sam and motioned for the blonde to follow her into the ocean. Samantha was a quick study and soon the two of them were body surfing the waves into shore.

Alex would have never acknowledged the fact that she enjoyed showing off for her lover and was secretly smiling deep within when Samantha, using her coquettish demeanor, coaxed the native Californian into showing her some real surfing. Alex put up a convincing front of not wanting to be the center of attention, but eventually did Samantha's bidding and demonstrated some of the skills that immediately returned to her the minute she mounted the board. The small blonde sat on her own board and watched in awe as her partner illustrated how to surf with both knees on the board and then did an exhibition consisting of a variety of drop knee positions with graceful agility. Alex encouraged Sam to follow along, full body on her own board, and ride the waves along with her to their breaking point near the shoreline.

Surfing always fascinated the Washingtonian but the ocean was never in close enough proximity to warrant proficiency in saltwater sports. As a teenager she water skied and had even been pulled behind a boat on a boogie board, but actually riding the waves was an entirely new experience. On the other hand, Alex never ceased to amaze her with the dark woman's expertise in everything she ever seemed to undertake. Sam loved watching the tall, tanned, muscular body of her lover as she choreographed a performance with the small board, on top of the water, riding the crest of the waves to shore.

While the two women were busy playing in the surf, one of the other guests came running out of the apartment, Frisbee in hand and began tossing it at the swimmers. Alex and Sam put the boards on shore and swam back into the water to join in the ocean to shore Frisbee competition that was soon underway as the Labor Day weekend party continued.

Pleasantly worn out from swimming, surfing, and competing, the duo came out of the salt water and plopped down on the towels Alex had spread out on the beach earlier, while waiting for Samantha to change clothes and join her.

"I have to admit I'm having a good time." The small blonde confessed as they positioned themselves side-by-side on the warm towels. "Do you realize that this is my first honest to goodness lesbian party?"

"And, does it pass with your approval?" Alex smiled, putting a strong, wet arm around the waist of her lover.

"Most definitely. I feel safe here and there aren't the ego battles of the males, so that part's really nice."

Alex laughed and drew Samantha closer, whispering in her ear, "Oh, Honey, you are an innocent; just wait until some of these dykes get a few too many beers and shots under their belts. I guarantee you'll hear the shit hit the fan more than once before we leave. Also, never let yourself feel too safe -- these aren't angels, just women and those who are not attached, may very well be looking to pick a rose, even if it's from someone else's garden."

"Alex . . ."

"Seriously, Samantha, these gals are no different than the guys. When drinking gets the best of them and they've absorbed more than they can handle, mark my word - they may even be worse. And always remember that people are people when it comes to looking for love."

"Speaking of inexcusable behavior . . ."

Alex sat up laughing. "Did I say that the behavior was inexcusable? Human maybe, but inexcusable?"

"Alex, get serious . . . I want to thank you for squelching my temper tantrum this morning; I'm more than a little ashamed of the way I acted."

"Consider it forgotten."

"No, seriously, I shouldn't have . . ."

"I said it was forgotten, we're at a party - remember?" Alex leaned over and kissed Samantha on the cheek.

The small blonde's nostrils flared as she caught the odor of a flaming barbecue and decided it was a good time for subject changing. "You must be starving after all the physical energy you've expended today. You want something to eat?"

"Is that a loaded question?" Sparkling azure eyes looked deeply into her lover's face, she arched an inquisitive brow, a slight smile forming as she licked her lips.

"You're impossible," Samantha gently swatted at the still damp body next to her.

"You wouldn't have me any other way," Alex continued to smile as she shook her dense ebony hair, spraying salt water everywhere.

"You're right, I wouldn't, but do you want to eat some real food or not?"

"Sure, if that's the only choice I have. Then I want to just lay here next to you, enjoy the scenery and relax for a while."

"Or dance?" the blonde prompted.

"Relax for a while."

"Join a sing-along." Sam tried to teasingly coerce.

"I do believe I said Relax for a while." She reclined her long body back onto the towel, closing her eyes.

"I'll be right back, Alex."

"I'll be right here, Samantha."

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Music blared on the semi-private beach and there seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of liquor and food as the group of women ate, drank, danced, talked, and played well into the evening.

True to Alex's words, as the evening continued Samantha began hearing snippets of arguments. Tempers began to flare and jealousy reared her ugly head, as some of the party participants started to show signs of having had a little too much of the nectar of the Gods.

Marcy and Von left a little after nine, begging away because of the ride home, but promising to come back for a more personal visit to the warehouse in the not too distant future. The remainder of the crowd seemed to be die-hard party animals.

It was close to midnight when Alex turned and requested they call it an evening. "I'm getting a little old for these all nighters. Samantha, what do you say we call it quits and retire to the cliff?"

"One slow dance and then we can leave, okay?"

"Ah, Samantha, I'm really rather tired, can't we skip the dancing?"

"Sure, we can skip the dancing after all we did so much together today. Let me think: you played volleyball and I played cheerleader; you threw the Frisbee and I watched; you tried your strength with arm wrestling while I cheered you on; then there was the tug of war that your team won, me I was - encouraging you. Of course we did swim, drink, eat, and relax together as I was quite exhausted after all my efforts. Gee, ya know, I hadn't realized just how much I'd done today . . . on second thought . . ." sarcasm landed on astonished ears, "about the dancing . . . never mind." She turned and began to walk back up toward the apartment.

A powerful grip enveloped her arm and spun her back around. "I think they're playing our song." Alex tilted her head toward the music as the first song they ever danced to began playing over the speakers. "Must be an omen."

Samantha looked up into penetrating blue velvet eyes. In an instant her anger melted and she found herself gliding in the warm sand, swept up in the arms of love.

The spell was broken halfway through the song when Samantha felt an irritating tap on her shoulder. Looking around she came face-to-face with their hostess.

"May I cut in?" Angel asked with a smile.

"I don't believe so," came the reply, also with a smile, as Samantha continued her dance.

The tapping resumed, "I think the polite thing to do would be to let me cut in."

"I think not, Angel. I've shared Alex all I intend to today, this is my dance and I plan to finish it, if you don't mind."

Angel glared at the small blonde and stomped off in the direction of the apartment, mumbling something under her breath.

Alex pulled Samantha ever closer, "I do believe you handled that very nicely," she whispered into the small ear, concluding the sentence with a nibble.

Sam grinned in spite of her vexation. "I can hold the Irish in tow, when I want to." She tilted her head to receive a soft kiss. "I love you Alex."

"I love you too, Samantha. The song's over, now can we go?"

"Sure can."

After the dancing incident with Angel, Samantha was more than ready to leave. She didn't want the small confrontation to get escalated into something more than it was, but she also didn't want to be rude, so they walked back through the apartment to say goodbye to all the new women they'd been introduced to during the day.

Alex's intuition would have fared better for them when she suggested that they simply walk from the beach to the car and drive home, but Samantha insisted on the formal farewells. The small studio apartment was filled to overflowing with women. Samantha couldn't believe that so many traveled over an hour just to attend a party. The small Italian must have been known for her parties for the crowd continued to grow, even after the sun disappeared into the ocean.

"Alex, is it customary for these parties to turn into sleep-overs?" Sam looked around to see that some of the women had already made themselves quite comfortable on the beach with blankets, while others curled up on the porch.



"Most of them don't work tomorrow and are really in no shape to be driving all the way back to San Diego. The safest thing would be to camp on the beach, the porch or the back deck," Alex concluded. More than a few of the guests already showed signs of fun, sun, beach and booze exhaustion, but the party was still going strong.

They continued to slowly work their way toward the front door, stopping along the way for goodbye hugs and kisses from new friends who offered phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Samantha was quickly learning the social customs of the American lesbian. She whispered to Alex that she had never seen a more kissy-face group of people, to which Alex laughed and replied, "Yeah, I grew up with kisses and hugs all the way around for every welcome and every goodbye. I guess it makes us feel more like family and close to each other. It's a ritual."

It seemed as though they were going to escape without having to say goodbye to Angel. They made it to the front porch and were just beginning to descend the stairs leading to the sidewalk when the slightly slurred voice of their hostess came ringing through the partially open front door.

"You're not leaving without saying goodbye are you, Alex?" Angel was standing, swaying precariously, seemingly holding up the door entrance.

"We wouldn't think of it," Alex lied. "We asked about you inside but someone mentioned you went back down to the beach so . . ."

"Noooo. I was in the . . . little girl's room. But . . . I'm out now!" She slowly approached the couple, never taking her eyes off the tall brunette.

"Samantha and I had a great time, Angel, thanks. We'll see you bright and early Tuesday morning." Alex placed her hand on Sam's shoulder in an attempt to continue moving toward the car.

"Hey! You're not getting away that easily."

Alex turned back to face the inebriated hostess just as Angel stumbled, tripping close to the top of the stairs. It was more than obvious that the small Italian had consumed more than her fair share of liquid entertainment. She was losing her balance and beginning to fall when Alex, being on the second step down, reached up and caught her at the waist. Angel's arms flew around Alex's neck.

"I just wanted to say Happy Labor Day." The small woman slurred, looking directly at Alex, while totally ignoring the chill in the deep blue eyes and the arrows being discharged from the green eyes of the woman standing next to her. Suddenly and without hesitation, Angel's mouth collided with unsuspecting lips as she planted a kiss that was not meant as a simple goodbye between friends.

Out of the corner of her eye Alex could see the blood rushing to Samantha's face while the blonde blushed in anger. Caught totally unaware Samantha stared into clear blue eyes,

formulating a verbal response to what she had just viewed. She opened her mouth to speak when Alex shook her head no. With a questioning look to her lover Samantha reluctantly closed her mouth and watched as the scene played out.

Trying her best not to injure the intoxicated woman, Alex pulled away from the kiss and began to pry loose the arms still in a vice-like grip around her neck. Suddenly, a better solution came to mind. "Don't say anything, Samantha," she pleaded. "Stay put. I'll be right back, Honey, I promise."

Allowing Angel to keep her strangle hold on her neck, Alex proceeded to put an arm on the back of the wobbling knees as she picked the small woman up. Long, muscular legs took the stairs two at a time, carrying a befuddled Angel in her arms. At the end of the steps she turned to the right and headed back toward the beach, never uttering a word to the woman in her arms. Within minutes she was standing at the ocean's edge.

"Alex," Angel mumbled, ignoring the situation she was in, and in her drunken grog she could have cared less where the final destination of the jaunt would be. "I think I'm in love with you."

The intense glare was lost on incoherent eyes. "I'm not even going to acknowledge that Angel, but I sincerely hope you remember some of this in the morning."

Still holding Angel in her arms, Alex kicked off her sandals and walked into the ocean until the water was lapping at her knees.

"I don't Ever expect to have this sort of confrontation with you again, Angel. And if you don't intend apologize to Samantha for this poor display of behavior the next time you see her, then my advice to you is to start looking for another job."

Dark eyes widened as Angel took in her surroundings and began to realize what her boss had in mind. "Um, Alex . . . what the fuck . . ."

"Shut up Angel! I don't want to be bothered with nonsense like this ever again, do you understand?" Not waiting for an answer she continued, "You and Samantha will get along or you will be gone. You need to sober up Angel and grow up while you're at it." With one arm still under the smaller woman's legs, Alex used her free hand to pry loose Angel's grip on her neck, she then casually dropped the intoxicated woman into the ocean and stood there long enough to make sure she was okay.

Women began coming out of the apartment to see what all the commotion was about, yet no one was foolish enough to try to intervene or confront the obviously angry Alex. The gathering crowd kept a safe distance behind the two figures silhouetted in the midnight moon glow. Not until Angel began thrashing and cursing in the cool surf did a few of her friends venture closer. Alex turned and looked first toward the street until she spotted Samantha's golden hair shimmering in the moonlight, only after she spotted her love did she then address the small group assembled on the beach.

"I suggest that someone make This One a pot of black coffee," she pointed down to the sputtering woman, "and keep her away from the alcohol. She's going to feel like a piece of shit in the morning as it is." Heads shook and mumbles resonated through the air but no one stepped forward. Alex was becoming impatient and anxious to get back to Samantha. "Will someone make sure she gets back to the house okay?"

Receiving their cue that it was okay to participate, a couple of the women simultaneously agreed to take care of the wet drunk and began walking into the cool surf to retrieve their friend.

Alex gave an affirmative nod, mumbled a goodbye, and without looking back began running toward the Porsche, ignoring a ranting Angel who was still flailing in the chilly water.

"I'm so sorry that happened tonight Samantha," Alex vocalized before she was even within touching distance.

"Like it was your fault she got sloppy drunk." Samantha quickly closed the gap between the two of them and put a finger up to the apologizing lips. "Don't be ridiculous, Alex. Your only misdeed is being beautiful. Guess I am going to have to live with the fact that there are people, who would go to any length to seduce you. People who would, as you said, try to pick someone else's flowers." She tried her best to make light of a situation that was tearing her apart inside.

"I wasn't talking about me when I said that, Samantha, I was talking about . . ."

"I know, I know, but as it turned out you were the desired target." Samantha countered.

"I'm not that easily seduced," came the indignant reply.

"Oh, but my darling, I beg to differ with you." A mischievous smile played on the lips of the small blonde as she wrapped her arms around her lover's waist.

"Maybe I should reword that, I'm not that easily seduced by just anybody, especially not by a drunk." Alex nodded back toward the ocean.

"And I'm very happy about that. So, what do you say we get your desirable butt home where it belongs?"

"Yeah, let's go home." She opened the car door and waited for Samantha to get in, then closed it tightly and walked around to her own side, shaking her head at the thought of the scenario that just finished playing out.

Quiet thoughts shared the ride back to the cliff-house with the lovers. Alex kept mulling the incident over in her mind, wondering if she had given the slightest indication that she was the least bit interested in Angel as anything other than a friend and co-worker. Reaching the conclusion that she hadn't, the next question was whether or not a working relationship was going to be feasible after tonight's fiasco. She glanced over at her lover whose flaxen hair glistened as the moon showered her in night beams; she would never do anything to jeopardize

the love they shared. Angel was a great assistant, but if it became necessary, she could still be replaced.

Samantha was lost in a world of her own. Try as she might to have contempt for the small Italian who just ruined the ending to a beautiful day, she felt nothing for her but pity. There was no doubt that Angel was not in Alex's favor and Sam no longer felt the fear of losing her lover to the small dark woman. Somehow between this morning's tantrum and watching the way Alex interacted with all the women throughout the day, Samantha's feelings of insecurity turned topsy-turvy.

The woman who had stolen her heart was beyond beautiful, she was also intelligent, fun, and athletic. Sam knew she would be a fool to think that heads would not turn when Alex walked down the street or into a room. What she needed to believe in her own heart was that just because someone might have a 'crush' on Alex, that did not mean the feelings were going to be reciprocated, and she now believed she believed it. The nipping green-eyed monster receded to a place so deep within her heart that she could no longer feel its presence. She smiled inwardly and patted her chest, promising to keep the little troublemaker at bay as much as humanly possible. Her Irish at times was more likely to control her, than she it, but she would surely try.

"Alex . . ."

"Saman . . ."

"You go ahead."

"No, you first Samantha."

The blonde smiled and placed a hand on her lover's knee. "Okay, I wanted to let you know that I'm not mad about what happened tonight. It wasn't your fault Angel got drunk and made a fool of herself. She's impulsive and bit of a jerk, but I don't want you to fire her. Okay, your turn."

"Well, you practically negated anything I had to say." Her hand gently covered Samantha's. "Angel really is a good employee; it's just that I think I was wrong about being able to mix pleasure with business with her. Maybe we shouldn't socialize with her for a while until she finds someone else to obsess on." Clicking the garage door opener, she pulled the Porsche in next to the now seldom used VW. "I don't know about you, but I've had one Helluva day and I'm exhausted."

"I didn't have to spend it being Ms. all-around sport - but mentally, I'm right up there with ya."

"I'm sorry, Samantha, I didn't mean to neglect you today? I was just trying to be sociable."

"Don't be silly, it's just that I like to hang on you on our days off and it's a little difficult to do with a moving target." Samantha intertwined her fingers with the long sinewy ones of her lover. "Actually I was quite proud of you today, Alex. You should have heard what the other 'spectators' were saying about you." She laughed as they were exiting the car, "You were even being

compared to their prospective mates." Throwing out her chest in a gesture of mock pride she continued, "I was the envy of my little group."

"Samantha, get real!"

"No, I'm telling the truth! Alex you can't, after what . . . 30 years . . . still be ignorant to the effect you have on people. Your height, your physique, your thick dark hair, your piercing blue eyes . . ." Samantha could swear she almost saw a blush on the beautiful tanned face before Alex turned to get on the elevator.

"Maybe I'll start to stoop, let my hair get all ratty, wear ugly contacts and . . ."

"And be without a mate," Samantha concluded as she walked into the lift next to Alex and encircled the tall woman's waist with two loving arms. "I guess it just came to my attention today what a noteworthy catch you are Alexis Dorian." She placed her head on her lover's chest.

"I feel the same about you," Alex confided, stroking the soft golden hair.

"Nah, I'm just the drink getter," Samantha looked up and giggled.

"Why don't you run the bath and let me be the 'drink getter'," Alex suggested as the elevator stopped at the penthouse floor. "I need to get rid of this salt and gritty feeling."

"Sounds like a deal to me, if you include putting some music on before you come join me."

"You got it."

Once inside the apartment they separated, blonde to the bathroom, brunette to the kitchen.

Constant romantic that she was, Samantha never passed up a chance to elaborate on the obvious. She added the bubble bath and then proceeded to douse the water with sweet smelling oil, completing the mood by surrounding the outer rim of the tub with candles. After turning the lights out she stripped and entered the tub, enjoying the warm water as it caressed her body. Sounds of a soft sax drifting in from the living room told her Alex was not far away. Samantha closed her eyes and placed her head on the water pillow, awaiting the arrival of her lover. Warm breath tickling her face apprised her of Alex's presence a millisecond before she received a tender kiss.

"Hi there, mermaid, want some company?" Alex purred.

"I certainly do." Sam sat up and took the offered goblet from her lover's hand, taking a sip and then placing it beside her on the Jacuzzi's rim. "I was just reminiscing."

"About?"

"About the first time I ever saw you."

"Oh, and . . ."

"I remember being struck by the fact that you looked so melancholy . . . you broke my heart."

"So you felt sorry for me?"

"Not exactly, I remember thinking how beautiful you were and what a shame it was that you seemed so lost and alone. I had a hard time keeping from staring at you," Samantha confessed with a small giggle.

"That's my Samantha, champion to the lost and forgotten."

"Don't be mean."

"I wasn't being mean - Samantha you have the softest heart I've ever encountered. That's why I was so confused when you responded to Angel the way you did. It seemed so out of character, until I realized that even Irish Angels can have a streak of jealousy - unwarranted though it might be."

"Unwarranted! That streak turned out to be anything but unwarranted. Check your short-term memory. That little episode tonight definitely put validation to my not liking the woman."

"Do you really want to start down that road at this hour?"

"No, I don't want to mention Angel again tonight. Right now it's just you and me time." Candlelight flickered as variegated green eyes searched the face of her beloved. "Since we're reliving 'old' memories - what did you think when you first saw me?"

"Actually, I think I may have heard you before I actually saw you . . ."

"What!?"

"Yeah, I remember I was sitting there lost in thought when I think you must have found your first clam. You yelled something and your voice carried on the wind like that of an excited child. I was jealous of you and your friend digging in the sand having such a good time. I can remember how the sun played on your hair making it sparkle like gold. I even thought about coming down and introducing myself but quickly decided against it."

"I remember looking back down at you when Suz and I were climbing the stairs."

"Did you really? I thought it looked like you might have just turned around . . ."

"You were looking up at us?"

"At you Samantha, I was looking up at you."

"Oh Alex, I don't even want to think about the road I might have taken had I not accepted Suz' invitation to move to Laguna."

"It was destiny, remember? There was no choice." The dark woman smiled as she realized that she was honestly beginning to believe that it must have been destiny that brought the two of them together. She lathered up a bath sponge and began sudsing away the residue of sunscreen, salt, and sand from her lover's body.

Conversation dwindled as the two women bathed, dried each other off and headed toward the bedroom. The long, deliciously exhausting day was winding down. Although the beginning was a little choppy, the middle had been quite entertaining, and the ending peaceful. The upset that took place as they left the party had not been under their control and, therefore, was discounted as not worth messing up the entire day.

Purposely neglecting to don pajamas, Samantha originally intended to finalize the evening differently, but she could tell by the lack of conversation near the end of their bath that Alex was fatigued. The small blonde crawled into bed next to her naked lover and wrapped herself around the long muscular torso.

"I had a great day, Alex."

"I did, too, Samantha - I'm glad you had fun. They seemed like a pretty decent group of women. I think we might even have made some new friends." One tenderly caressing hand gently traced circles on the small blonde's back. "Just relax, and I'll rub your back for a little while."

"That feels wonderful, but stay within that area unless you intend to do more than sleep."

"You feel great, Samantha, but rather than a before bed snack, I think I'll wait for breakfast if it's okay with you." Alex kissed the top of her lover's head, breathing in the sweet residue from the oil Samantha poured into the tub. She continued to play her fingers delicately across the satiny smooth skin, sensing Samantha's body relaxing into the closeness of the moment.

"That's fine with me, I don't think I realized until my head hit your chest just how tired I really am. Sweet dreams Alex."

"Sweet dreams, Samantha."

As she had done every night since meeting Sam, Alex silently thanked the Goddess for bringing a little glimpse of heaven into her life. She didn't want to imagine ever again being without the soft body cuddled up next to her. The person snuggled into the contour of her body fit there more securely than anyone else ever had, and she was exceedingly grateful that the two of them found their way back to each other. That they 'found their way back' was exactly how she felt about the connection she shared with this small female she held so protectively in her arms.

Because of her inability to make a relationship last and because of all the hurt inflicted both by and upon her, Alex did her damndest to renounce her mother's beliefs in reincarnation and soul

mates. She convinced herself that if she denied that soul mates existed then she would not feel so terrible at each new loss, and that maybe some day she would simply stop continuing to look. She had pretty much relegated herself to a life of short sordid affairs when Samantha made her appearance on the small private beach.

Lying in bed, holding Samantha, Alex thought back to every personal commitment she ever launched. There was always an initial nervousness, newness, and exuberance of discovery, and all of these factors were similarly evoked when she and Samantha began, but the equivalency between this relationship and all her prior ones stopped there. Feelings of comfort, familiarity, trust, and a sense of coming home, unlike any she had ever before experienced were there from the onset of her intimacy with her Irish Angel.

*Maybe I'll take Mom up on the offer to schedule us appointments for regressions when we get back from Sedona. Maybe I'll even let Samantha think she talked me into it.*

A crooked smile spread slowly across the dark woman's face, melting her angular Greek features. She could feel Samantha's grip loosen from around her waist as steady rhythmic sounds flowed from the petite woman. Sleep easily claimed the body nestled safely in the arms of love.

"I intend to make you the happiest woman in the world, my Destiny," Alex whispered to the sleeping form. *You came to the right place to satisfy your heart's desire, Samantha Renee Riley - I'm just the woman who can give you the world.*

Sunday melted into yesterday as Monday became today - the final day of the long weekend. Alex had no intention of sharing this day with anyone. She would even sit through the two remaining movies in order to insure that today would be spent in the solitude of the penthouse - the only occupants being Samantha and herself, along with the small bundle of fluff who adored them both. Alex closed her weary eyes and joined her lover in slumber.

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Filtering rays of sunshine danced around the quiet room, compelling the light sleeper to awaken and glance at the clock. It never seemed to matter what time she closed her eyes to sleep, the inner alarm would not be stifled - it was 7:30. Alex concentrated and closed her eyes, trying to return to the land of nod where her companion would be for at least another 2-3 hours. She didn't want to get up and be alone in the apartment this morning, but having opened her eyes once, her bodily functions strongly suggested she use the bathroom before attempting to return to sleep.

Minutes later when Alex walked back into the bedroom she found that Samantha had already changed positions and was on her side with her knees pulled tightly up, her arms wrapped around Alex's pillow. The fair-haired beauty never seemed to have any trouble continuing an interrupted sleep; she simply rolled over and recaptured her dream. Determined to do exactly that this morning, Alex slowly crawled back into bed and spooned up next to her lover, Samantha's back to her front. She quietly placed one strong arm around the smaller woman's body, her hand coming to rest on a soft, firm breast. Involuntarily her body responded with a pleasurable ache



from the area between her thighs. She closed her eyes and kissed the nape of neck covered with silken, fairy-fine hair. *Concentrate on sleep Alex, not on Samantha*, she willed herself.

Samantha moaned and shifted, but only enough to further close the remaining gap between their two bodies, her buttocks finding the contour of her lover's front, legs intertwining and her hand releasing its hold on the pillow to cover the larger hand that rested gently on her breast.

"By the Gods you feel good," she muttered, not opening her eyes and with absolutely no intention of waking up. "Let's stay like this forever."

"Forever, my Destiny," Alex answered as she closed her eyes and bid Samantha's God of sleep, Hypnos, to return her to the realm of his son Morpheus.

Perhaps through sheer desire the dark-haired beauty got her wish and fell back into a deep sleep. But even the God of Dreams could not keep the beautiful Greek in dreamland forever. Two hours later she stirred to awakening, as the entire room was now bathed in sunlight. *How the Hell can she sleep with the room so bright?*

She marveled at Samantha's ability to continue slumbering while the world around her bustled with excitement. Suddenly the decision was made - it was time for the sleeping beauty to awaken - this day was much too beautiful to waste.

Long, slender fingers, still positioned over the soft breast playfully traced circles around smooth nipples, causing them to pucker and stand at attention. A crooked smile appeared on the classical face when the elicited response motivated Samantha to wiggle closer. Without lifting her hand Alex trailed it down the length of the small frame, tactilely teasing the luscious body in front of her. She felt the smooth skin ripple as her hand touched each new area. Unable to control her desire, she continued sliding her hand down the body she loved to touch, sighing when the apex of her final destination was reached. Her fingers played in the soft curly mound of gold, which hid the treasure she sought just below it. Pushing her own body closer Alex covered the back of Samantha's neck with kisses, while her fingers were otherwise occupied slowly opening her lover's nether lips, and allowing themselves passage to the already moist region between.

"Is this a wake up call?" a soft voice mumbled.

"You bet your sweet ass it is," came the throaty reply. "Good morning, Samantha. I'm famished."

"Isn't that my line?" the smaller woman questioned.

"Depends on who you ask and what you mean. I do believe it's my line this morning." Alex continued as she gently assisted her lover onto her back and quickly covered the naked body with her own.

Looking down into sleepy sea-green eyes Alex could not keep from leaning into a kiss. As their lips were about to touch a small hand shot quickly up - "Don't Alex, let me brush my tee. . ."

"No time for that," Alex grabbed the offending hand and placed it down on her own passion.  
"Just push, Samantha."

She shuttered as she felt the small woman do as she was bid, intensifying Alex's escalating desire to return her own hand to its former position. She kissed the blonde below her harder than she anticipated as her craving grew and her fingers danced in between the soft folds of the nether lips. Her thumb toyed with the small growing bud and two stray fingers entered the depths of her lover.

"Oh, Alex . . ."

"What, my love, what do you want."

"Anything Alex . . ."

"Ah - Anything - that's my specialty. But you confuse me a little. Would that be Anything like . . . this?" She slowly moved her long, slender vehicles of arousal in and out of the abyss of love - their bodies began to rock together with the rhythmic motion.

Incomprehensible moans of pleasure escaped Samantha's throat.

"Or more like . . . this?" the dark-haired tease queried as she bent down and filled her mouth with a firm breast. She released the nipple and blew hotly on the moist area, watching as it hardened before her watchful eye.

Another moan, as Samantha gyrated under the orchestration of her dark hero.

"Actually what I had in mind . . ." Alex continued, repositioning herself between Samantha's legs and beginning to concentrate on the warm, wet region at the heart of her lover's fire.

"Was something . . ." Her next statement was muffled as she pressed her lips against the heated flesh, opening the folds with her tongue and allowing herself full rein.

A guttery response from the head of the bed informed Alex that her attentions were being favorably received.

Samantha's legs had been resting, one over each of the taller woman's strong, muscular shoulders. Alex shifted her position to kneeling, causing the waterbed to sway slightly. With this new arrangement Samantha found she no longer had a voice in the choreography of the dance in motion. Alex placed one hand on each of her lover's buttock and lifted the object of her desire closer. When she opened her eyes the view was reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe's Red Canna, a profusion of desire waiting to explode into gratification.

Alex immersed her face in the soft golden locks, drowning in the fragrance that made her blood pulse faster through her veins. This was definitely Paradise; she closed her azure eyes and drank in the sweet milk of desire, slowly allowing her lingua to reach into the area deep within the

recesses of her soul mate from whence the liquid of love flowed freely. With a cadence equal to that of a love song Alex's tongue plunged in and out of the small moist tunnel as Samantha's hips undulated in unison with the metrical motions of lover.

Alex opened her eyes and stared at the vision below her. She smiled without moving her mouth then suddenly stopped all movement, and waited with bated breath for a response - an inarticulate plea. She was not disappointed.

The intensity in Samantha's voice caused the dark woman's heart to beat faster.

"What . . . why . . . don't . . ." Half-thoughts emerged in the form of non-sentences with significantly clear questions.

"Problem articulating your thoughts Samantha? I'm sorry did I do something wrong."

"Alex, Don't tease!"

"Tease?" Her soft tongue slowly ran the gambit of the area before her.

"Alex."

She reinitiated the movement. "You taste marvelous," was punctuated by a soft groan from Samantha as she grasped the pillow under her head, one hand on either side and pulled it toward her face.

A muffled, "I can't take it any longer Alex," reached the ears of the fair-haired damsel's tormenter.

"Oh, but I so wanted this morning to last."

"Please, Alex . . ."

"If you insist, Samantha."

Still holding the slight woman in a position of vulnerability and with experience as her guide, Alex resumed her melodious implementation of the act of love. Samantha lost sight of inhibition as her body began to uncontrollably tense and release, her muscles constricting with heightened sensation. Between gasps of air, as rapture captured her passion, she reached for her lover's shock of ebony hair.

"Enough Alex . . . oh . . . Alex . . . I can't take . . ."

With an unseen smile and a fluidity of movement, the ever adept lover carefully place her beloved down onto the bed as she removed her mouth from the hot moist area, and allowed expertly agile fingers to re-enter the erotic domain of her Destiny.

During the celebration of love that followed and in an amorous frenzy, Alex changed positions. She brought herself up to full length beside her lover and placed one long leg between Samantha's, straddling her lover's thigh. Unable to contain her movements, she pressed hard against the leg below her and moved in unison with her fingers. She could feel Samantha beginning to peak and increased the pressure on her own sizzling center.

Samantha smiled as she felt her lover's wetness on her leg, and tightened her thigh muscles to add stability for Alex's enjoyment. The blonde took voracious satisfaction in ascertaining that the dark-haired beauty was not only pleasuring her, but was extremely close to climaxing as well. Together the two continued the dance; Samantha's nails biting into the flesh on Alex's back encouraged the consummation. From deep within the smaller woman's core came a surge, followed by throbbing. Alex entered fully one last time and held steady as the pulsating continued. Almost simultaneously, the more experienced woman let out a cry of triumph, reaching orgasm with her lover.

A pleasantly exhausted Alex relaxed as she positioned herself next to Sam and cradled the petite woman, not wanting to break physical contact. The only words that made it from thought to voice were repeated by both women, "I love you."

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Moments later as she lay in her soul mate's arms, her head damp from exertion, her depths still involuntarily producing an occasional spasm, Samantha whispered, "I could get used to Holiday Mondays - how many are there in a year?"

"As many as you desire," was the unexpected answer. "But, you know, as satisfying as that was, I'm still surprisingly hungry."

"Yeah, that's what you get for eating a vegetarian," Samantha chuckled, embarrassed at slight of tongue. "Wait, wait!" She put her hands up in protest. "I meant for eating vegetarian . . . you know . . . vegetarian food . . ."

"Sure you did," Alex sarcastically responded.

"No . . . Really . . . I was going to say, 'That's what you get for eating vegetarian food - you could almost eat again within the hour.' You know like they always tease about Chinese food."

"Uh, huh," Alex smiled over at the now blushing blonde. "So, is the cook prepared to offer the meal again?"

"No - this cook is pleasantly exhausted - only one morning feast per person . . ."

"Excuse me . . . just how many people do you cook for?"

"Um, privileged patronage - actually this restaurant caters exclusively to one client."

"That's more like it . . ." the conversation was interrupted by the buzzing of the intercom. "Who the fuck could that be at this hour on a holiday?" Alex rolled off the bed and raced toward the front door.

"Yes?"

"I have a flower delivery for a Ms. Samantha Riley," a strong tenor voice announced over the intercom.

Samantha joined Alex and was standing beside her. Two similarly perplexed faces stared at each other.

"Guess it's safe to say you weren't the one who ordered the flowers." Samantha grinned at the thought of her Alex, who was always so in control, not having any inkling as to who had sent her lover an unexpected gift.

"Safe guess - but who did?" There was a note of discontent in the contralto voice.

"Hello - anyone there?" the voice of the deliveryman interjected.

"We'll never know if you don't answer the man, Alex."

"Oh, yeah." Alex pushed the button again. "Just a minute, I'll be right . . . wait . . . can you just leave them?"

"Sure."

"Great . . . why don't you just do that and I'll get them in a few minutes. Thanks."

"You're welcome - enjoy your day."

"Thanks - you, too." She turned back to Samantha. "Maybe Sonny sent them, he has a habit of doing the unusual."

"Do you really think so?"

"No . . . but he's the only one . . ." A thought ran through her mind, but she didn't want to give it voice until she was positive.

"What is it Alex?"

"Nothing . . . why?"

"The look on your face - you know who sent them don't you?"

"No. No!"

"Yes, you do - tell me."

"Samantha this is getting us nowhere." *Damn, no one has ever been able to read me this quickly before!* "Look, let me throw on a robe and I'll go down and settle this little mystery once and for all."

"Okay," Samantha reluctantly agreed. "I'll start breakfast."

"Done deal." Alex jogged back to the bedroom and grabbed two robes. "Here," she said as she threw the smaller robe in the direction of the unclad blonde, "Put this on - temptation does not seem to be my strong suit today." She smiled at the seductress watching her from the kitchen as she darted out the door. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be here waiting!"

All the way down in the elevator there was the guise of only one face before her inner eye. She was positive she knew who had sent flowers on this lovely holiday morning . . . what's more she knew exactly why. Relief flowed over her when in her mind the benefactor was pinpointed. But, in no way was she comfortable with the emotion that spontaneously leapt into her heart the minute the delivery guy announced a gift for Samantha. Just yesterday she had been the one giving Samantha lectures on jealousy and in that instant the tables were turned.

Opening the front door she bent down to retrieve a small plant wrapped in rainbow paper and topped with a beautiful lavender bow. She recognized the small neat script on the outside of the envelope before reaching down to pick up the offering. *Gotta give her credit, she knows how to kiss ass on the morning after.* Alex cradled the ceramic pot in one hand studying the small petals. *Guilt certainly got her out of bed bright and early this morning.* The fragrance of the graceful purple spikes reached her nostrils. *So - is this is the voice of guilt or fear.* Wanting to be more than sure, she fingered the small envelope and found that it was not sealed. During the ride back up to the apartment she carefully opened the card and read:

Dear Samantha:

Please accept this Hyacinth - the flower of forgiveness - in the light of the indiscretion I subjected you to last night. I would say it was the fruit of the vine of Dionysus that took over my personality, but in actuality, I was drunk on beer and shooters. If it's any consolation I am sporting one helluva hangover.

I know Alex will take me for the idiot that I am and forgive the stupidity of the moment. After all, the embarrassing ordeal she put me through by dropping me into the ocean will not be lived down for years to come - my 'friends' have all assured me of that.

Anyhow - I'm truly sorry and will reiterate this sentiment in person tomorrow morning.

Have a Great Labor Day ~~ Angel

She slipped the card back into the envelope, *They must have talked somewhere along the line -- she knows of Samantha's love of the mythic, the prose and lavender. There may still be hope for the salvation of employee and friend.*

The smell of breakfast permeated the air as she stepped off the elevator and into the hall.

"Got yourself a Forgiveness plant," she stated, putting the newly acquired vegetation on the kitchen counter.

"A what?" Samantha finished buttering the muffins and stepped over to take a look at the flowering plant. Embedded in the dark dirt was a flag reading: Hyacinth "please forgive me". She laughed to herself and gave Alex a questioning look as she reached for the envelope with her name on it.

"I would think with the rainbow colors that it's from a friend."

Alex shrugged as Samantha opened and read the envelope.

"By the Gods - it's from Angel," she looked up at her lover in disbelief. "I've got to admit I'm shocked!"

"Why?" Alex queried. "She knew she was wrong last night, and she couldn't have been much drunker."

"Yeah, but Alex this is . . . so . . . well . . . so thoughtful - look at these flowers - they're purple." She stretched over to smell them. "And they're fragrant."

"Guess she knows how to get her point across."

"Well . . . after yesterday, I do believe she has a knack for doing that drunk or sober," the small blonde laughed. "But, look at the time, it's not even noon. I wouldn't have thought she'd even be up yet, much less have called a florist."

"Another thing you might be able to say for her is that she isn't stupid. This was quick thinking on her part. What I am surprised at is that she found a florist who would deliver today."

"Here - wanna read the card?"

"Sure," she shrugged as she nonchalantly took it from Samantha.

"When you were trying to figure out who sent the flowers, did you have any idea it might have been Angel?"

"I thought as much," Alex admitted. What she didn't own up to was the feeling of relief when her thought was actualized.

"I don't have much of a green thumb, but this might look nice down in my office. You know, Tuesday morning should be very interesting."

"Nice sentiments," Alex vocalized, handing the card back to its owner. "Being willing to apologize once with a gift and the second time in person could be taken to mean that she's really sorry."

She glanced over at the blonde who was sporting a lost look. "Earth to Samantha."

"Oh - I was just thinking - if I were Angel, I'd find it very embarrassing to have to face me tomorrow morning. At least this beautiful plant has broken the ice and will make the situation a little less strained."

"What adds to the lack of antagonism is the fact that you're such a forgiving person. I think Angel knows that from the way you interact with all the people in the Center, even with her."

"I don't know," a slight rush of red began to color the blonde's cheeks, "but I do know that we need to stop standing around talking and get back to important things - food. All I have left to cook are the eggs. I'm glad I hadn't started them or they'd be cold by now."

She turned back toward the stove.

"So . . . what do you want me to do?" Alex asked feeling helpless.

"You can put the strips, muffins, juice, and silverware out."

"Got it." Hands large enough to juggle two glasses of orange juice, 'meat', and bread reached out and did so. Alex went to pick up the silverware at the same time but found it a little awkward.

"You don't have to take it all at one time, you know?" Samantha chided playfully.

"Of course I know - I was just stretching my limits."

Warmth from the late morning sun was beginning to make its way to the western side of the building. Alex opened the louvered windows and turned on the ceiling fans to imitate a small ocean breeze.

During breakfast they discussed plans for the afternoon and evening, both agreeing that secluding themselves in the penthouse sounded like a marvelous way to pass the day. The upcoming week was going to be a busy one, especially if they were planning on taking the vacation Alex talked about within the month, and they would only get to spend bits and pieces of time together throughout the days to come.



After eating more than she probably should have, Samantha didn't feel like doing dishes; she suggested leaving them for later and starting the entertainment. Alex disagreed, she had plans for the evening and they didn't include doing dirty dishes. She offered to clean up and tried to shoo Samantha into the living to set up the movies.

The blonde refused to put the VCR on until the both of them were snuggled into comfortable positions on the couch; so together they ended up back in the kitchen, cleaning up the breakfast mess. With the two of them helping they were watching the movies in no time.

Alex actually managed to stay awake during both the videos and surprisingly enough enjoyed them. She didn't want Samantha to have another cook and clean up chore on the holiday so she suggested ordering from one of her favorite restaurants. It had a particularly unique take-out and she wanted to lavish a little elegance on her lover this evening.

Samantha sat beside her lover on the couch listening to Alex order. She started with a bottle of Blackberry Merlot and then requested to be filled in on the daily specials. From appetizer-to-dessert the Dorian menu began:

"Okay, I'll have the Calamari Fritti appetizer, a double order of Minestrone soup and a double Caesar salad. Um, let's see, how about an order of Fusilli Primavera and one of the Penne Arrabiata." She glanced over at the blonde who was listening with interest.

"Just a second," she informed the person on the other end of the line.

She knew of Sam's predisposition for sweets and thought a little light teasing might be fun.

"Um, Samantha - you wouldn't want a bit of divine Italian decadence for dessert now would you?"

"Is that a real question?"

"Well, after a meal like that you might be too full."

"I think not - there's always room for dessert!"

"I figured that would be your answer." Alex smiled and put the phone back to her ear. "Send two portions of the Tiramisu. That should do it. About how long before it arrives. Great. Thanks."

She hung up the phone and . . .

"That's sounds like a pretty expensive 'take-out', Alex."

"Nah, not much more than if we had dined in the restaurant."

"Yeah, I believe that!"

"Listen, they said it would be here around 8 o'clock. That gives us a fair amount of time to dress if you want. So, do we go formal or informal with the dinner? It's your call."

Samantha thought for a minute then suggested, "Hey let's take it down to the beach."

The look on her lover's face was priceless - she had just ordered an elegant dinner and Samantha wanted to take it down into the sand.

"If that's what you want, Samantha," Alex answered, astonished at the suggestion.

"Oh, Alex - the look on your face." Samantha couldn't help but laugh. "I'm only kidding, Honey. Honest."

"Very funny. I'm trying to be romantic and you want a picnic."

"Honestly Alex, there's no way I would want take that meal out onto the sand. I'm not fond of grit in my pasta and Certainly not in Tiramisu. You want to dress for the occasion?"

"Sure. Do you think you can manage to be ready to dine in an hour and a half?"

"Oh, I think I might manage that small feat, if one tall, dark, beautiful person I know can keep her hands and other body parts to herself while we're bathing." Samantha grinned.

"I think she can behave until after dessert," Alex replied. "After the Tiramisu I mean." She laughingly corrected herself.

They set about getting ready and true to her word Alex behaved. Of course to do so, she hurried through the shower and exited the bathroom while Samantha was still drying.

Samantha also lived up to her end of the bargain and was completely dressed and ready to sup by the time the buzzer rang announcing that the meal had arrived. She stepped out of the bedroom into the living room just as Alex was about to answer the door.

A long slow whistle greeted her as she walked across the living room floor toward her lover.

"By the Goddess you are exquisite," Alex breathed, as she released the door locks and instructed the delivery people on how to get up to the penthouse.

Samantha chose to wear a metallic silver, above the knee cocktail dress, accented with the lavender jade necklace and earrings Alex bought and gave to her in San Francisco. She smiled coyly at the response she received from her lover and walked over to join her by the door. The heels she wore placed her closer to Alex's height than ever before, and she found it strange to almost be able to look the tall dark beauty in the eyes without having to look up.

"You look pretty refined yourself," Samantha commented, running her hand down the lapel of the white silk-linen suit and over the obviously bra-less nipples that stood erect at her tantalizing

touch. She stepped even closer, drinking in the classical features of the woman standing before her. "White is an excellent choice for that tan you're sporting," she whispered seductively, tracing the back of her hand softly over Alex's cheek.

A larger hand engulfed the smaller, bringing it to her lips to be kissed, while dazzling sapphire eyes caught those of emerald. "If you want to eat dinner when it gets up here, I suggest you go sit yourself down at the table. If not - I'll have them put everything in the oven, and you can Be the main course."

The small blonde laughed as she kissed Alex on the cheek and did a dainty pirouette before walking over and seating herself at the table.

Alex opened the apartment door and awaited the arrival of the elevator. She motioned to the waiters as they exited the lift, wheeling a silver cart laden with various thermal containers. They followed the tall woman's lead into the kitchen area and went about starting to unload the cart. After acquainting the restaurant employees with the kitchen, Alex went and sat across from Samantha at the table. The older looking waiter set a small glass holder with a burning candle on the table, then opened the wine, poured them each a glass and sat the Calamari appetizer on the table with a split ramekin containing dipping sauces.

The second waiter was busy putting the entrees into the oven, ladling soup into bowls and preparing the salad. As the soup was being served, Samantha noticed that the dishes were not ones from the kitchen. At that time the younger man was explaining that the salad was on the counter, the entrees were still in thermal containers, and that he had placed the dessert into the refrigerator. She was about to ask about the dishes when it was obvious they were getting ready to leave.

Getting up from the table Alex thanked them and walked with them to the door. On the way out of the apartment, the younger of the two men turned and wished Samantha a 'buona sera'.

She smiled sweetly then watched as the older man handed Alex what was probably an invoice. Sam could make out only a few words as Alex continued to walk with them to the elevator.

"Alex . . ." Samantha began as her partner re-entered the room.

"Sorry it took so long, Honey. I wanted to lock up before I came back in, that way I don't have to bother with it after we eat.

"But Alex," the blonde continued, "they didn't only bring the food, they brought everything!"

"That's the idea - you don't have to cook or clean up." Alex smiled at the astonished look on the blonde's face.

"This must have cost a small fortune! I don't know that I'm comfortable about . . ."

"Whoa - slow down. Don't worry about the money, okay?"

"Listen, I know the business is doing really well, but you know we never talk about money and you always pay for everything . . ." There was a whine in the young woman's voice.

"Samantha . . . not tonight, okay? Not now, not with your dinner about to get cold."

"But Alex . . ."

"Samantha, hush."

"Okay, but the time is very close at hand when we are going to have to discuss financial arrangements. You can't always be the one footing the bill."

"We'll, see . . ."

"No! No, 'we'll see' . . . we need to talk."

"Okay, Samantha, we'll talk - but later, like tomorrow, or next week, or after your birthday. But we will talk, I promise. For now can we please have a nice dinner?"

"Absolutely." She would allow the subject to be dropped after all she didn't want to spoil the mood that had been so expertly set into motion. But she vowed, to herself, that soon they would discuss the money.

Green eyes sparkled as they looked across a candlelit table into her lover's face. "You are such a romantic, Alex, don't ever try to tell me you're not."

"I wouldn't think of arguing with you, my love." She lifted her glass to toast. "Happy Day without Labor, my Destiny."

"The same to you, Alex."

Glasses clinked and Sam commented on the excellent bouquet of the Merlot. The remainder of the meal went just as Alex anticipated. The food was superb, the atmosphere idyllic and the company heavenly. Conversation was kept to a minimum, focusing on dreams and aspirations, sparking Samantha's imagination to kick into overdrive and allowing Alex to mentally make a list of the places they would be traveling to in the near and distance future.

At the end of the meal Samantha couldn't get over the fact that the people from the restaurant even left plastic lined boxes to store the dirty dishes in until the morning crew returned to pick them up. Alex told her they would have stayed throughout the entire meal but she requested that they didn't. She hadn't wanted Samantha to feel like she needed to rush.

As she knew it would be, dessert topped Samantha's list of favorites. Alex teased that if the small woman continued to eat at the same rate, she might some day find it difficult to fit into the dress she was so elegantly modeling tonight.

They continued to talk long after the food was put away. Alex took off her jacket and the two of them kicked off shoes and got comfortable on the couch. Before calling the evening a success they finished off the wine, sitting and watching the surf break on the shoreline far below the cliff.

"That was the most romantic, or rather 'rotic' dinner I think I've ever had. Thank you, Alex."

"My pleasure, Samantha, anytime."

"I think not . . . but the thank you still stands."

Alex sighed, knowing that Samantha was right and that someday soon they would have to have a discussion about financial matters. She pulled her lover close and suggested they call it a night. After all, tomorrow was a workday.

"Damn," Samantha grinned, "Did you have to spoil the evening with the 'four letter word'?"

"Fraid so - on top of that you get to deal with Angel."

"Oh, now you've really done it!"

"Okay," Alex suggested, "Pretend I didn't mention those last two nasty statements."

"I can do that."

"Good - but I still think it's time we got to bed, how about you?" Alex got off the couch, and held out her hand for Samantha to take.

"Agreed. I guess I've been wined, dined, and seduced . . ."

"Oh, my darling, you may have been wined and dined, but you've yet to be seduced."

Even in the soft candlelight, Samantha could see the sparkle in the azure eyes that could make her knees weak with a mere glance.

"But I can rectify that in a heartbeat." Alex winked at the smaller woman and drew her into loving arms. She leaned down and placed a hungry kiss on eagerly awaiting lips, while skillful fingers unzipped the shimmering dress, dropping it to the floor at their feet.

One slight tug on the drawstring and the linen pants loosened, presenting plenty of room for small hands to slide comfortably down to the perfectly shaped buttocks; squeezing gently and without a word, Samantha coaxed her lover closer.

"I would like nothing more than to add seduction to this perfect day," Alex confessed, picking Samantha up and carrying her to the bedroom.

"I think it might be my turn to seduce you."

"We'll see. Right now it doesn't seem to me that you have the upper hand." Alex chuckled. "No. Come to think of it, you mentioned not more than a minute ago that you had been 'wined, dined, and seduced.' I'm simply trying to make your statement become one of fact instead of fantasy.

With her final destination reached Alex put her precious bundle down at the foot of the bed. Sans heels, Samantha found herself, once again, dwarfed by the woman in whose shadow she was now standing.

Nimble fingers reached around the body in front of her as Alex unhooked Samantha's bra and then helped the smaller woman out of her half-slip and panties.

The now naked blonde reached up and began unbuttoning the soft, flowing blouse her beloved was wearing. Moist lips kissed the first area of exposed skin, breathing in the scent that caused her heart to beat faster. Sam placed her head on the inviting chest, her arms wrapped around her lover's waist, allowing Alex's fingers the opportunity to travel a geometric path across the smaller woman's back.

Not changing her position Samantha whispered, "I can't put into words how much I've enjoyed being with you today, Alex."

"My bard is at a loss for words? That's incredible."

"Don't make fun, I'm being serious." She looked up into tender eyes. "From the moment you woke me up until this very minute, this day has been filled with your devotion, even when we were just sitting around watching movies. Did you ever think how wonderful it would be if everyone could share just a portion of the love we have for each other?"

"To be honest with you, no. I guess I'm selfish that way. When I'm thinking of you, no one else in the world enters my thoughts."

"Oh Alex, I don't think about other people during intimate moments . . ."

"Samantha this Is an intimate moment."

The small blonde began to blush.

"I'm not saying anything is wrong with that - it's just that I don't think like you do, but then I'm not the artistic soul, you are."

"I was just trying to explain to you . . ."

"I know what you're saying, Honey, and I guess I shouldn't be making it so difficult. I agree with you. It would be fantastic if the entire world was in love, then maybe humanity wouldn't have so many problems. But, until that time arrives, I'm grateful that my little corner of the universe is filled with you."

She got into bed and patted the area next to her for Samantha to join her.

"For now, let's go back to being selfish and end this holiday on the same note it started."

"Sounds like a deal to me," Samantha smiled as she snuggled close to Alex.

Surely putting the day to rest was of no less importance than greeting it. Two eager participants lay side-by-side in the bedroom, the glow of the Indian Summer moon shining down upon them, adding a touch of enchantment to the already magical atmosphere that surrounded the lovers.

If seduction was to be the climax to a day full of synchronism that was as it should be. The day was coming full circle and the seducer would, sometime during the remainder of the evening, most definitely become the seduced.

Continued in Part 3.

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### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## Part 3

### Chapter 3

The relaxation of the day before assured that Alex would be up before the sun. Surprisingly, Samantha was up not long after.

Standing in the bathroom holding Rainbow, Alex teased, "See little one, your mommy can get her butt out of bed while the sun is still shining all by herself when she wants to."

"Don't be a smart ass, Alex," Samantha countered, a smile barely visible on her face. "I could always turn right around and go Back to bed, you know; I would have no trouble doing that."

"Okay, truce!" Going nose-to-nose with the black ball of fluff she added, "Sorry Mommy is so grouchy when she does join the land of the living early, Rainbow."

"That does it," Samantha threw a damp rag at the already dressed executive. Of course it was caught and immediately tossed back in the direction from whence it came.

"No more - I give up." Alex threw her hands in the air, feigning surrender.

"Yeah, right." The small blonde turned and continued grooming. "You're just lucky my toothbrush wasn't full." She smiled into the mirror, watching out of the corner of her eye as Alex headed toward the kitchen. "First one dressed makes breakfast." She yelled to no one in particular.

"Don't I always?" thundered into the room from the vicinity of the living room.

"Yeah, mostly always," Samantha whispered with a smile as she left the bathroom and finished getting dressed. "You get the easy stuff."

"I heard that!"

"Heard what?"

"Just finish up and get in here. We'll actually have a little free time before opening up, so you want a complete breakfast instead of toast-and-run?"

"Actually, after last night's activity, that sounds scrumptious." She walked into the kitchen and gave Alex a peck on the cheek. "Here let me help, that will get us finished sooner."

"Okay you do the juice, set the table, butter the toast, and I'll do the cooking."

"How butch of you!"

"Hey, watch that - you'll talk yourself right out of a breakfast maker, if you're not careful."



"Nah, you love doing it - after all it's basically the only thing you can cook. How in Tartarus did you manage before I came along?"

"Ever hear of Cup O'Noodles or pizza? I think I must have been the sole support of at least half the employees at the pizzeria. And of course there was always dining out."

"Alone?"

"Do you really want me to answer that one, Samantha?"

"Subject changing time," the small blonde acknowledged.

"Agreed."

By the time they'd finished the repartee, the meal was completed and the two sat down to an early morning breakfast. The sky was a baby powder blue with soft glowing pink clouds floating above the calm Pacific. The beach was deserted as usual, save for a scattering of sea gulls catching their morning meals. Had they snapped a picture from the penthouse, it could surely have been entitled 'Paradise'.

Soon it was time to go down and open the Center, but Samantha seemed to be dallying, finding unnecessary chores to do to occupy her time.

"Samantha, I've been ready to go for a half hour now, but every time I suggest we get going you find something else that absolutely has to be done immediately. Do you want me to go on down and you come when the apartment meets your standards?" She sounded a little testy but it was already 9:45; people would be arriving in 15 minutes and she liked opening up before the first employee arrived at the front door.

"You know, that sounds like a good idea. Why don't you go ahead down - I'll be along shortly. I don't really have anything pressing to do this early anyway." She avoided meeting the blue eyes, which possessed the gift of seeing into her soul.

Alex walked over to kiss her good bye when she realized that the small blonde was not even attempting to meet her half way.

"Hey, did I do something wrong between the time we ate and now?"

"No." Samantha finally looked her lover in the face. "I'm just a little pre-occupied."

It hit home all at once and she felt like an absolute idiot. She should have realized when Samantha didn't have to be dragged out of bed that something was amiss. Between loving making last night and breakfast this morning the situation completely slipped her mind.

"Okay," the tall executive started. "No more excuses and no more putting the inevitable off." She tilted the shorter woman's head so their eyes could meet. "There is no getting around having to

deal with Angel today, Samantha. You're a good diplomat. You're making the situation worse by dwelling on it."

Misty green eyes stared back at her, threatening to spill tears onto the face she adored. "Stop that. You're being silly."

"I've been thinking about it since we finished the dishes," the small blonde started. "I don't want to be angry with her, but on the other hand, what she did wasn't right and even though she was drunk, the feelings must have been there when she was sober, or they wouldn't have surfaced when her inhibitions were diminished. So, it seems that I'm having a harder time coping than I thought I would." She let her chin fall to her chest; a sigh of exasperation escaped her partially closed lips.

"Listen, Samantha, basically the ball is in your court. You're the coach and you're calling the shots. If you don't like the way the star shooter is playing - fire her."

"Fire her!?"

"You hear me, fire her."

"Ball, court, coach, shots - Alex - I'm not a team player, never have been. I don't handle predicaments like this easily."

"Okay, let me put it this way. You're the playwright, and you're also the director. The camera's rolling and the actress, who is playing the town slut, is on stage. If you don't like her rendition of the character - fire her." She smiled broadly, pleased with her quick thinking and being able to put the terms into ones Samantha could easily associate with. Alex could see that her desired effect was reached when the smaller woman's look of anguish disappeared.

Samantha smiled up into the face of her hero, stood on her toes and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Thank you for putting that little problem into perspective. I do believe I'm ready to go to work now. I still have a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach knowing that she has a large crush on you, but I think I'll be able to deal with it." She put her arm around her lover's waist as they walked to the elevator. "Especially knowing that I have the power to - Fire Her!"

"Please don't wield that power unless it's absolutely necessary, she's the best PTA I've seen in a long time and I would play hell replacing her."

The lift reached the second floor, the four-day weekend was at an end, and Tuesday morning was staring them in the face. Alex gave Samantha one more kiss as the doors opened for the blonde to exit.

"Samantha, when you get to your office, could you call the restaurant and tell them they can pick up the dishes anytime they're ready?"

"Sure, no problem. See ya in a bit; have a good morning." She gave a small wave as she turned and headed in the direction of her office. The elevator and the executive resumed descending to the first floor, and business began as usual.

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Even though she knew the advantage was in her corner, her stomach still churned every time she thought about her unavoidable meeting with the feisty Italian, which was destined to happen sometime today. She didn't know whether or not Angel would venture up to her office or if she should instigate the meeting by going down to the PT Clinic. Deciding to finish up some paperwork, she merely postponed the inevitable.

Looking up at the clock she was surprised to find that it was almost noon. Sam was caught up on everything she needed accomplished in her office, so now would be as good a time as any to start lunch. She'd just run down to the first floor and see if Alex was going to be free in about a half an hour. She decided to take the stairs for the exercise and as she walked past the gym area she spotted Angel busy treating a patient. *Luck is with me*, she thought, *I don't have to deal just yet*. Continuing on to Alex's office, she tapped on the door in case her lover was in the middle of a meeting of some sort. *No need looking presumptuous, Samantha*.

"Come in, the door's open,"

"Hi." The blonde smiled at her lover who was sitting at her impressive desk the epitome of a successful executive, and why not - she was. "Thought I'd ask if it was close to lunchtime for you." Samantha walked over and sat on the edge of the desk.

Alex covered the smaller woman's hand with her own. "Sure . . ." She was about to lean over and give Samantha a kiss, when there was a knock on the door.

"Door's open."

Samantha started to slide off the desk, but Alex put an arm on her leg and stopped her. "You're fine, stay there," she whispered.

The door opened and in walked Angel. Her dark brown eyes met brilliant green, and even through the dark olive skin, the woman behind the desk and the woman sitting on the desk could see a rush of blood beginning to tint the small woman's cheeks a slight rose color.

"I didn't mean to interrupt, I just needed . . ."

"No interruption, I was just leaving to start lunch," Samantha began as she squeezed Alex's hand and proceeded to stand. "By the way, Angel, would you like to join us for lunch today?" Imitating her lover she arched an eyebrow as she stared intently in the direction of the small Italian.

Angel cleared her throat before answering. "Um . . . why, sure . . . I guess. Ah, yeah . . . sounds great. I can get away in about 25 minutes would that be okay?"

Samantha's smile was saccharine. "Twenty-five minutes would be just fine; you know where to find me. I'll buzz you up when you're ready." She leaned over and gave Alex a passionate kiss then whispered into her ear, "You want to come up or sit this one out?"

Unable to contain her grin the dark-haired executive shook her head slightly, "Think I'll have a late lunch; you girls go ahead without me."

Samantha nodded approval, then turned and walked toward the door, giving Angel a slight nod as she passed. Upon reaching the door she turned and reiterated, "See you in 25 minutes, Angel."

"Sure thing, Samantha." The small dark woman swallowed hard then turned back around to explain to her boss the reason for the intrusion.

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Exactly 25 minutes to the second later Samantha heard the anticipated buzz of the intercom. *At least she's punctual!*

Sam walked over to the door and buzzed her up. Leaving the door ajar, she went back into the kitchen to put the finishing touches on her luncheon.

A timid knock was heard on the doorframe, as the olive-skinned woman stood poised at the door. "Hi . . . Samantha."

"Come on in Angel and have a seat at the table. Everything's ready."

"Cool."

Samantha decided to show off her culinary expertise making her own rendition of cob salad, using shrimp, cheese, bacon bits and avocado and of course leaving out the ham. It was definitely eye appealing and she was rather pleased with herself. As she walked toward the table carrying both dishes, Angel rose offering assistance.

"That's okay - I can manage." She sat one plate down in front of Angel, the other on her own place mat. "I don't have a large variety of drinks to offer; there's water, herb tea, or juice. I've discouraged soda in the house. The only way I can keep Alex from drinking it is to not buy any."

"Water's fine."

"You sure?"

"Positive! This looks great, Samantha."

"Thanks, I just need to get the drinks and crackers." In less than a minute she was back at the table with the beverages. It was difficult to ascertain which of the two was the more uncomfortable. Neither seemed to want to establish eye contact.

Finally, Samantha spoke, "Mangiare, Angel, mangiare," she coaxed.

"Hey, it almost looks too good to eat. This is really great, Samantha." Nervousness was not a usual state for Angel and she wasn't handling hiding the fact that she was not very comfortable. *Damn, I should have told her I had a previous appointment - dumb dago! Look sincere, apologize and get it the Hell over with!*

"Um, Samantha," Angel began picking at her food. "Did'ya get the plant I sent yesterday?" *Fuck! You know damn well she did, it's sitting right there on the counter.*

"Yes, it arrived almost before we were out of bed," *Go ahead rub it in.* "It's sitting over there on the counter. I thought I'd take it down to my office this afternoon. It's rather lovely, thank you Angel." She noted that the small Italian was playing with her food. "Don't you like salad?"

"Yeah, I like salad fine, and this is good. It's just that this situation is a little embarrassing and my appetite is not what it usually is."

"Uh, huh." The blonde mumbled, also beginning to toy with her food, something that Samantha seldom did. *That's right, you don't want to make it too easy for her now do you? You're enjoying this too much, Samantha!*

"Ya know . . . I could really use a beer right now . . . do ya have one, Samantha?"

"Isn't that what got you into this predicament, Angel?"

"Yeah, an overabundance of it, but I really could use one to get through this luncheon - or I could just leave." *Don't be stupider than you already sound - nice going asking her for a damn beer. Ah, shut up - one beer isn't going to hurt anything!* "Ya know, I know I was a jerk, and I know you're the boss, but this isn't easy for me . . . and it's not Really work related . . . and I could sure use a crutch - so, could you cut me a little slack, Samantha?" she pleaded.

"Sure, I could do that." Not looking at the woman sitting across from her, Samantha got up and went into the kitchen. *Well at least you know she's nervous. Stop it Samantha - this is not funny. Yeah, I know but it feels good to have her where I was the other night . . . with the control taken out of her hands. Come to think of it, I guess neither one of us was in control.*

She got out a Dos Equis for Angel and poured herself a glass of wine. Giving the olive-skinned woman the beer she sat back down across from her. "Have many more patients today?"

"Actually I don't have another until about 5:30 this afternoon, so don't worry about the beer and work."

"I wasn't worried, Alex says you're good at your job."

"I don't know how to start, Samantha. I've never done this before. I guess the easiest way is to just come out and say that I'm really sorry and it will never happen again." Eyes as dark as night searched those as cold as stone, looking for a hint of forgiveness, a sparkle to let her know that things would get better.

Malachite eyes glared at the woman sitting across from her. "You know, I could say 'that's okay' and make you feel better, but I'd be lying. I don't feel that what happened was okay. I guess my biggest concern is that it Wasn't just the alcohol. I believe there was more to that display than processed hops. So, maybe that's what you need to tell me Angel. Am I going to have to run interference between you and my lover or are you through trying to win Alex over in that respect?"

"Maybe this conversation was not such a good idea." Angel started to push away from the table almost indignantly. "Maybe we should do this some other . . ."

"No, Angel . . . no other time . . . it's now or never. It's here or nowhere. So you better get ready for a bit of discomfort or take the coward's way out and leave. But if you leave . . . if you walk out now . . . keep on walking and don't bother coming back for that 5:30 patient."

"You can't be seri . . ."

"I'm as serious as a heart attack, as the saying goes. We settle this little conversation between the two of us right here and now or it never gets settled, and you can head back to San Diego or wherever it is you would go from here. I'm not about to have an employee trying to put the make on Alex. And, you and I are going to have some kind of working relationship if you intend to continue working here. So - do you want to start convincing me or would you like to leave?" Sam sat back and took a sip of her wine, waiting for a response.

Dark eyes looked respectfully in the direction of the small blonde. "You know Samantha, you have a lot of spunk. I took you for a push-over, a wimp; I can see now that I was wrong." She shifted slightly in her seat, taking a large gulp from the bottle in her hand. Straightening her back she inhaled deeply. "I'm truly sorry for what happened Samantha. Truthfully, between you me and the wall, I've had a crush on Alex since the day I met her."

"Truthfully Angel - that's been no secret. You're not very discreet in the way you respond to Alex."

"Probably because I always thought there might have been a chance for me."

Samantha was taken back by the honesty of the statement and the surprise showed on her face.

"I'm just trying to get everything out in the open, so we don't have to deal with this again. Listen, Samantha, I didn't know you from Eve when I came to interview for the job. I didn't even know

you existed - how would I have known? I didn't know Alex was gay, but that didn't stop what I felt. When I first heard Alex's voice over the phone, I practically cream . . . never mind."

Samantha chuckled at the confession that started to slip from the employee's lips. "I know what you mean about her voice," the blonde admitted. "And as for seeing Alex for the first time, I'm sure that reaction is . . . well, since you're being so honest . . . I thought she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen when I first saw her, so I can't blame you for that, either."

"Good . . ."

Samantha interrupted, "What I can fault you for is continuing to pursue her after you knew that we were a couple. Especially with you working for us."

Angel looked Samantha squarely in the eyes. "Again, all I can say is that I'm sorry. I have a big ass ego and I always felt that people who didn't at least try to go for what they wanted were losers to begin with. How do you know you can't win if you never try? Of course, had I not been sloshed I would have never pulled a stunt like that, especially in front of you. What I didn't think about was that I would lose all the way around - my job and any possibility of having the two of you as friends. I can see now how devoted Alex is to you and that's as it should be." She leaned back in her chair and finished off the bottle of beer.

"Maybe what they say about everything turning out for the best is true." There was a pause before Angel continued. "At least now you know that I was attracted to Alex."

"Actually, I already knew that . . ."

"Yeah, but now I've got it out of my system - I've been put in my place, so to speak, and know I don't stand a chance in Hell of ever getting to first base with her. By the way, my friends reiterated word-for-word what Alex said to me the other night; believe me when I tell you that makes me feel about six inches tall. Samantha, I love my job, and I want to keep it. I don't want either one of you for an enemy."

Like a cleansing wave, satisfaction rolled over the small blonde as she sat there looking at the woman seated across from her. The final direction of the scene that was now to be played out was in her hands. She could either accept the performance on the player's merits or fire the woman. It was almost scary to have that much power over another human being's life.

Having said all she could think of to rectify the harm that had been done, Angel sat quietly, looking out at the ocean and watching the seagulls play in the waves on the beach below. Her heart was racing wildly as she waited for a response. She had just groveled for the new life she was making for herself here in Laguna and was still kicking herself for allowing the situation to ever get to this point.

"Angel?"

Involuntarily the dark-haired woman jumped, as a hand reached out and touched her arm, bringing her back to the present. Looking into soft emerald eyes, she could understand why Alex found this gentlewoman such a treasure and felt like the fool all over again for not having wanted to be Samantha's friend. She didn't need to be alienating the only people she knew in town.

"Yeah?"

"I confess that the other night I wanted nothing more than to practice my Tai Kwon Doe on you," Samantha began with the trace of a smile lighting up her face. "But Alex, as usual, expertly took care of the situation. I was angry with you for wanting the same thing I wanted. It took quite a bit of self-realization before I could revamp my mind to deal with the fact that I was in love with someone who would be desired probably by a lot more people than you before my lifetime is over. More importantly, I needed to realize that Alex had already chosen me to spend her life with. You see, Angel, I finally concluded that I can't go around getting mad at people simply because they find Alex attractive - it's a fact - she is. I have a lot of growing to do, and I need to be able to feel confident enough about my relationship with Alex to not let petty crushes eat at me."

She looked Angel directly in the eyes. "I can understand how you felt and maybe even what you did - I've already walked that mile in your shoes. I can forgive your indiscretion this time, Angel. But if you want to remain an employee here, like you have implied that you do, and if you want to try to establish some base of friendship between the two of us, then I need to believe that you will never make a pass at Alex again. I also need to believe that you want to be friends with both of us, not just with Alex. If that's not the case and you feel that the two of us could never be friends, then I've come to the conclusion that friendship isn't a necessity for you to continue working here, I've . . ."

"That's enough Sam, I know what you're trying to say and I promise I won't be making that same mistake again. I knew in my heart how Alex felt about you before I ever pulled that drunken stunt. She makes no bones about the fact that you are her world, and you're right, you do need a little more confidence in your relationship, in yourself, and maybe even in the fact that Alex would never do anything to hurt you. At first I didn't think I wanted to be your friend because I wanted so desperately to be Alex's, but that's changed. I don't usually ask for second chances, it's the Italian pride I guess, but this time I am. So to finalize this - I would like to continue working for Alternative Paradise and be a friend to both you and Alex."

The two women sat for a few minutes, each mulling over all that the other just confided in her. The view from the window worked its magic at calming down two quickly beating hearts as they watched the rhythmic ebb and flow of the ocean to the shore. Finally the small blonde broke the silence.

"So - I guess that's that. You think now you might be able to put a dent in that gorgeous lunch I slaved over?"

"Yeah, I think maybe my appetite has returned a little." There was a sparkle in the brown eyes that had been missing during the entire conversation up to this point.



Small talk filled the air as the two began to reacquaint with each other, steering clear of topics concerning the absent executive; the sting was still a little too fresh to embark on discussion in that area. They spoke of accomplishments and aspirations, appreciating that each of them possessed high hopes for the future.

In the middle of a sentence, Samantha glanced down at her watch. "By the Gods, it's almost 2:45." She looked back up into smiling brown eyes. "Oh, yeah . . . The Gods . . . my passion is mythology, Greek literature, Sappho . . ."

"I caught the drift."

"Anyway, I have a few phone calls that need to be made this afternoon. I don't mean to cut this short but . . ."

"No problem. You want some help with the clean-up before I go?"

"No - I'll just put the stuff in the dishwasher, I cleaned up the majority of the mess before you got here."

"Well," Angel stood and held out her hand to the small blonde.

Samantha stood and came around the table. "I do believe "family" does this instead of a handshake." She put her arms out in the gesture to receive a hug and the other woman reciprocated.

"I'm glad we were able to resolve this difference, Angel."

"I feel the same way Sam. Thanks for being so understanding."

"You're welcome." *Please don't make me out to be a fool*, she thought to herself.

Just as they were about to release from the friendly embrace a deep clearing of a throat was heard from the vicinity of the doorway.

"Ah ha. Thought I'd come up to see the two of you pulling each other's hair out and what do I see instead - the two of you hugging. So . . . do I need to have a talk with someone?"

"As if!" Samantha was the first to answer, meeting her lover halfway across the room and throwing her arms around Alex's waist.

"Well, it looked quite incriminating and . . ."

"Don't go there Alex," Angel chimed in. "It was a 'family' hug, I was just leaving." Her eyes sparkled, as she looked pleased to be back in everyone's good graces.

"You two took long enough. I assume all's well by the looks of things?" She looked down into twinkling emerald eyes. "I couldn't wait any longer, I'm starving. You said you bring me something down. My stomach thinks my mouth has gone on strike."

"I'm sorry, Alex. Your salad is in the refrigerator, I'll get it." She nodded goodbye to Angel and went to retrieve the overdue lunch.

"I've still got some time before my next patient - I'll see ya downstairs, Alex." She started to walk by the executive but stopped and looked up into radiant blue eyes. "Listen, Samantha and I have worked everything out. I know I owe you an apology as well . . ."

"Hey, if you and Samantha are on okay terms with everything, then you can consider me included. I've done the 'I'm sorry' story from being drunk more times than I'd care to admit. Frankly, I'm just glad my ace employee is still just that." Her eyes danced as she smiled at the small woman in front of her.

"Thanks, Alex." Glancing over to the kitchen Angel waved. "Thanks for lunch, Samantha."

"You're welcome. See you later."

"Yeah, bye."

"Okay you," Samantha addressed her lover. "Here's your lunch."

"Looks great." Alex sat down at the table. "So . . . fill me in."

Samantha plopped down in the chair next to Alex and while the executive ate her late lunch, the smaller woman verbally re-enacted the entire conversation that had preceded her entrance.

When Samantha finally wound down and brought the discussion to an end, it was with the positive conclusion that she and Angel would be able to work things out and that she didn't have a problem with giving the olive-skinned woman a second chance. Alex already assumed that had been the decision when she walked in and found the two women embracing. She breathed a sigh of relief that Angel's termination would not be forthcoming. Having to hire a new physical therapy assistant was not something she anticipated having to do this soon after getting Angel broken in and having to fire her would surely have messed up Alex's vacation plans. It was a necessity to have someone in the clinic who knew how she liked things handled, someone who knew the patients and who was comfortable working with little to no supervision. If she was nothing else, Angel was efficient and knowledgeable when it came to physical therapy and extremely responsible in her job duties. Alex found, over the short amount of time the Center had been open, that the small Italian was a definite asset to the clinic and she would have hated to have been forced to terminate her because of something stupid the small dark woman had done when she was drunk.

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The remainder of the week sped by, with Samantha becoming increasingly excited about the trip down to La Jolla. She insisted they make out a schedule so she would have some idea as to what they were going to do and when. Alex loved the way Samantha's face lit up when she thought of someplace new or an activity she wanted to add to the list. The dark-haired woman worried that the small blonde would be upset when she found out that almost none of the La Jolla events would come to fruition on this trip to the southern tip of California. At least it would be easy to plan a second venture south, after all she knew exactly where Samantha wanted to go and some of what she wanted to do.

Secretly, Alex compiled her own agenda, one she diligently worked on finishing when her lover was not around. She needed to have a concrete plan of where they were Really going and what they were actually going to be doing on the 10 days they would be absent from the clinic. Her excitement was growing along with Samantha's and she realized about midweek that this vacation was going to be as much for her as it was for the birthday girl. It had been years since Alex had taken a real vacation, and even though there would be a little business worked into the 10 day trip, it would be minimal compared to the enjoyment of the secret adventure.

By Wednesday morning of the following week, Sam had her lecturers booked, her paperwork caught up and all the telephone communications she absolutely needed to deal with finished. Basically, she spent the last two days walking around the Center looking for things to do or for things for other people to do, and eventually getting on everyone's nerves. After seeing a look of distress on one of the employees faces Alex approached her lover, turned her around and marched her into her office where she all but ordered the small woman to sit and begin work on her Great American Novel, while the free time was available.

Evenings never contained enough hours and went by quickly even for the anxious Samantha. She was progressing nicely in her martial arts lessons and on nights when she wasn't in class she was practicing or climbing on the wall.

By the time Thursday the 16th rolled around, the entire Center was glad Samantha was going on a mini-vacation. They all knew the holiday started Friday and the acronym TGIF quickly changed into TGIT as it neared 10 o'clock on Thursday evening.

Alex talked to Kim in private and gave the substitute head honcho phone numbers where she could be reached over most of the next 10 days. Kim refused to be sworn to secrecy until Alex promised to keep her beeper on while still in state and to having the cell phone handy when they weren't.

Between Kim, Angel and the rent-a-therapist, Alex felt quite secure in leaving for the mini-excursion. Her only worry was that the extra authority might go to Angel's head. She shook off the disconcerting feeling, realizing that she needed to give the woman a loose rein sometime and now was as good a time as any. They called a meeting of each of the crews and discussed who would be left in charge and the chain of command if any problems should arise.

The three friends decided that having Kim spend the night on Thursday would probably be best, so she wouldn't have to get up with the sun to be at the Center when it was time to open on Friday.

Before saying goodbye to Kim, Samantha made the quiet woman promise to allow Rainbow to sleep in bed with her if the kitten missed them too much. Alex simply gave Kim a smile of comradery as she turned to walk out of the room.

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Finally, the much-awaited morning arrived. With the car having been loaded the night before, morning necessities were limited to dressing and driving. Alex discovered the easiest solution to getting Samantha out of bed in the a.m. was to promise her the night before that they would do something exciting when they woke up.

According to Samantha, the Goddess of Nature was on their side as they began their short trip down to La Jolla. Not having been in California for very long, this was Sam's first coastline cruise and she was thoroughly enjoying the scenery. The Santa Ana winds were still prevailing and they drove with the top down on the Boxster, taking advantage of the warm summer-like weather. Coast Highway South supplied them with an almost constant view of the ocean, and only occasionally would the watery depths disappear to be replaced by Southern California's green rolling hills.

The excited blonde took in the scenery, constantly comparing each new inlet to Rainbow's End Beach, the name she decided fit their little stretch of sea and sand. Everything else around their beach had already been designated Paradise. In her imagination the pot at the end of the rainbow would have lead to Paradise so it only followed that the beach should be called Rainbow's End.

Suddenly Samantha was pointing out the passenger's side toward the ocean.

"Those are ominous looking, Alex - what are they?"

"This is San Onofre and that's the nuclear generating station."

"Oh, that's a little scary. Lovely knowing that we're living this close to a war target."

Alex looked over at the two large concrete domes; "We also live between Los Angeles and San Diego, both important harbors, so we'd be doomed anyway. But the stations also supply a large amount of energy to this entire area."

Samantha frowned up at her lover in disbelief, "You mean to tell me you're For the use of nuclear power?"

"Not exactly, I was just playing the Devil's Advocate - there are pros and cons to everything, even nuclear power plants. Perhaps that's not a good subject for a vacation discussion?"

"Perhaps not - I don't want to ruin the mood," Samantha agreed.

They hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, in great part due to the younger woman's excitement about the trip.

With a twinkle in her tired baby blues, Alex glanced in Samantha's direction. "You know, we probably should have just left last night after making love. You were so keyed up - if we had left then it would have saved you from tossing and turning the rest of the evening, and I could have at least gotten some sleep once we got to Mom's."

"Oh, but then in the darkness I would have missed all this wonderful scenery!" She announced, stretching as high as she could and expanding both her arms up and out. "No Alex, this is the perfect time of day to travel."

"Well, that sarcasm was totally lost on you, now wasn't it? The dark-haired driver pinched the arm closest to her.

"Ouch!" The blonde pulled away from the offending hand. "No, I caught the drift of your statement." She teasingly smiled up at her lover; "I was just ignoring it. Besides, you can play catch-up when we get to our destination. A nap might just be what you need. Aurora and I will have Plenty to talk about I'm sure!"

"If you think I'm going to leave you alone with Mom while she proceeds to tell you everything I ever did wrong in my entire childhood you're . . ."

"Absolutely correct - is that what you were going to say 'Half-pint'?"

"Samantha that's not a good place to go . . . besides the fact that it is totally unfair!"

"Who was it who told me the 'Fair was in Pomona' or was it 'Del Mar'?"

"Actually," Alex grinned over at the love of her life, "it was both. You do have a good memory, now don't you?"

"Of course I do, I'm a Bard, remember? I have to take in all the words - those that are important as well as those not so special. I need to place them and all the little conversations that went along with them into the secret filing cabinet in my mind. Then when the appropriate time arrives I simply close my eyes, open the cabinet and search through the files until I find the needed information - regurgitate it and viola - fact/fiction/conversation, etc." She snuggled up to the driver. "But that was a 'Yes or No' question now wasn't it?"

"There are no 'Yes or No' answers in that file cabinet of yours, Samantha." Alex kissed her gently on top of the head. "That's part of what makes you unique, and I only love you more for it."

The soft morning haze was beginning to burn off as the pink/blue sky turned cerulean, losing the last of the sunrise serenity. Because it was a weekday morning, Alex suggested the early arrival, in anticipation of missing the majority of the commuter traffic. Of course she had not foreseen that the night before was going to be so lacking in sleep. Never in her life could she remember being as keyed up as Samantha had been for the past few days. Satisfying that excitement and turning it into reality was now her responsibility. Alex was glad she decided not to fill Samantha in on all the birthday plans as nothing filled her heart with more joy than the look of surprise that lit up the small blonde's face whenever she received something she wasn't expecting. The dark-haired woman would gladly have showered Sam with daily surprises just to experience that look, but her mothers forewarned her to slow the pace a little.

Kelley's words still rang in her head during from a conversation on the phone a few weeks back, *"Remember Alex, you are going to have to eventually explain to Samantha why you are able to lavish such expensive gifts on her. Don't continue to spoil her so extravagantly, at least not until you're past the sheet-burn stage of your relationship and into the reality of your life together. I'm sure she didn't fall in love with you for your money. As far as I've been able to find out, she had and probably still has absolutely no idea of who you are and what your heritage is. The little vixen you've fallen so hard for seems to be the real McCoy - but one day she is going to ask you where you get all the money you spend. Be prepared to give her an honest answer and hope to the Goddess that it doesn't change your relationship!"*

Alex was curt with Kelley, almost to the point of furious, when the older woman mentioned that she hired a private detective to check into the background of the new twinkle in her daughter's eye. But then Kelley went into great detail to explain to Alex that she wanted to make sure Samantha was everything she seemed to be. She explained that they needed to do this as a precaution, especially since they knew that Alex had her mind set on eventually bringing the pert little blonde into the business as a full partner.

What bothered Kelley the most was the malevolence of Don Riley, Samantha's father. Even before the Riley's visit, Kelley started the investigation, knowing how much Don hated Marge, Alexis, and Have It All. Even though Alex was not the owner of the business, his hatred for her was known throughout their business competitors. Alex bore the brunt of his dissatisfaction with Have It All and he would have done anything within his power to ruin her financially, if given the chance.

After the fact, when he turned so viciously on his own daughter, Kelley knew for certain that Don had no preconceived idea that Alex and Alexis Dorian were the same person. A hatred such as he harbored would never have allowed him to be civil to her, even before he knew of her relationship with his first born.

"Alex . . . Alex," Samantha poked her gently. "Where are you? You certainly aren't paying attention to me."

"What . . . um . . . what gave you that idea?"

"I've been trying to get you to look over at that view - look there are whales out in the ocean."

"I'm sorry, I must have been daydreaming," the dark beauty confessed, looking for a vista point where she could park the car.

"Are you too tired to drive, Alex?"

"No, Honey, I was just thinking about all we plan to do while we're down here," she lied, while continuing to search the side of the road. She quickly changed the subject. "I'm pretty sure there's a vista stop somewhere around here. There . . . there it is." She pulled the car onto the paved out-cropping.

Before the engine was stilled, Samantha was out of the car and leaning against the railing.

"Oh Alex, hurry," she motioned toward her and then pointed out to sea, "Aren't they gorgeous?"

"Yes, those are California Grays - they migrate down from Alaska every autumn. The coastline will be spotted with them from now until late Fall."

"Alex, I know what we could do while we're down here. We could take one of those whale-watching boats out and get a really close look at them. Couldn't we?"

"I don't know, Samantha . . ."

"Why not, you said we could do anything I wanted to while we were down here. I would love to go whale watching!"

"Okay, Samantha, we'll see -- I'm not sure if Mom and Kelley have anything planned for the time you haven't already filled in. Mom's a great one for surprises. So, let's wait until we get there to make any definite plans. What do you say?"

Sounding a bit deflated but quickly letting it go, Samantha agreed. Alex placed her arm around Samantha's shoulders and drew her close. They stood watching as the large mammals gracefully continued their southbound journey to warmer waters. The enormity of the creatures compared to the fluidity of their movements never ceased to amaze the native Californian even though she had been exposed to the migration parade since she was a small child.

"Come on, Samantha, we're not far now. Why don't you give Mom a call and tell her we're about 15 minutes away and ask if they want to go out for breakfast or eat at home."

"Okay."

Kelley answered the phone and the consensus at the parental abode was that they wanted to take the girls out for the morning meal and then a tour of the little town.

Within minutes the La Jolla turn off came into view. Entering La Jolla placed them above the small seaport and the view of the ocean as they neared the little town was another breathtaking sight. While still at quite an altitude, they turned off the main road and down a long private drive,

something that was almost none existent in Southern California where land was considered 'black gold'. A sprawling two-story Spanish-style villa sat at the end of the drive, on the top of a cliff, overlooking a distant beach.

"Wow."

Alex glanced over at Samantha and smiled. "It's quite a sight isn't?"

"Did you grow up here?"

"Partially . . . it was my grandmother's house on Mom's side of the family. When she passed on, Mom inherited it - I was about 10 at the time. Before that we lived in Hillcrest mostly. But we used to come here quite often. Nannie used to love to throw big parties; she was a very flamboyant person. You would have liked her, Samantha."

"I'll bet I would have. Oh, look, there's Kelley."

Alex pulled further into the drive and parked.

"Welcome to Cielo en Tierra Sammie. Consider this your home away from home." Kelley walked over and hugged the small blonde then welcomed her daughter as well.

"By the Gods, this place is huge! I thought the warehouse was big but warehouses are supposed to be big. This is . . . this is . . ."

"This my darling is a Spanish Villa and it also is supposed to be big. Nannie never did anything small, did she Kelley."

"No, not your Nan - never small. Never small or run-of-the-mill or . . ."

"Normal?" Samantha chimed in.

"Well, normal is not usually a term we use around here, but I guess it's as good a word as any," she smiled at the young blonde and motioned everyone into the house. "Your mother has been anxiously awaiting your arrival, as usual." She gave Alex a knowing look. "Actually, she's been anxiously awaiting your arrival for about a month now . . . ever since the Festival . . . so now I'll be able to get a little peace and quiet." As an aside to her daughter she added, "You know Alex, you really shouldn't . . ."

"Come on, Kelley, not now - we're here aren't we?"

"Yes. Yes you are."

Aurora was waiting for them in the kitchen area, four glasses of a light brown, creamy looking concoction lined up on the breakfast bar. She greeted her 'daughters' and motioned to Kelley and Alex to serve.



"No initiation into the Dorian household would be complete without your mother's famous brandy Alexander," Kelley began, "So . . . here's to your first official visit Samantha. And again, welcome to Cielo en Tierra.

"I never took Spanish in school, what does . . . what you just said mean?"

"Good question." Aurora motioned the most recent family member over to the sliding glass doors that led out onto the patio. "I know this view rivals yours." She smiled at the younger woman, "You and Alex may live in an Alternative Paradise but we live in Heaven on Earth."

"Wow! You people sure know how to pick real estate." Samantha laughed at the stupidity of the statement that spewed forth from her lips.

"It wasn't us that bought the land; it was my grandmother who actually picked out this site. We just got to reap the benefits." Aurora hugged her new daughter. "So, how do you like your drink?"

"It's delicious - I just hope it doesn't go to my head." Samantha exclaimed. "Alex wouldn't let me eat anything but a banana before we left home." She giggled as she continued to sip on the sweet liquid.

"One Alexander never hurt anyone," Aurora insisted. "So a quick tour now, or after breakfast?"

"Mom, Samantha's really hungry. Why don't we do food first and touring after? I'm sure the house isn't going to go anywhere before we've finished eating."

"Great, whatever you girls want. I'm just happy you're finally here!"

After a short discussion of where to go for brunch, a majority decision settled on going to one of the more elegant restaurants on Prospect Street, that way they could take a short walking tour after eating and take in the local culture and art.

It seemed to Samantha that there was not a section of the small village that did not possess its own marvelous ocean view. The restaurant itself was perched on top of yet another cliff with a terraced dining area. Kelley turned over the car to the valet as they were greeted like royalty at the front of the building by the *matrê de*.

"Ah, Ms' Dorian, how enchanting to see you once again. I see we brought the young one along for dining this beautiful day." He smiled over in Alex's direction and received in return a slight nod and smile as she put her arm around Samantha's waist and escorted her in.

"Good morning, or is it almost afternoon, Troy. Yes, we finally got the prodigal to return home for a visit, but as usual she'll be off again before she even gets a chance to get on our nerves." Kelley conversed with the distinguished gentleman as he personally saw to it that they received the best table on the veranda. "Troy would you please send over a bottle of Riedel Sommeliers White Bordeaux?"

"Right away Ms. Dorian." He snapped his fingers on the way back to his podium and then whispered the order into the rushing waiter's ear.

Meanwhile, Samantha was doing some whispering of her own. "He keeps referring to Kelley as a 'Ms. Dorian' Alex, why does he do that?"

"Because she is Ms. Dorian," Alex grinned as she answered the question, her left eyebrow arching.

"I don't understand," Samantha protested. "Your last name is Dorian and your mother's last name is Dorian and . . ."

"Kelley's last name is Dorian," Alex finished the sentence for Samantha. "Guess you could call us a precedent setting family. Mom legally changed her name to Dorian before I was born. It's Kelley's family name. Mom convinced her mother it was the best name for her writing career, and because Nan loved Kelley almost as much as she loved Mom, she didn't pose any objections. It did cause an initial raucous with the changing of all the legal documents having to do with Mom's inheritance, but finally the family treated it as though it was a married name change and everything went smoothly thereafter."

"So when you came along," Samantha interjected . . .

"When I came along, naturally my last name was Dorian. We are all legally the same family."

"It's a shame you couldn't have all been blood related, too."

Alex caught the twinkle in her mother's eye and smiled back at her then turned and offered her lover a glass of wine, as Kelley was about to make one of her infamous toasts.

"To my 'girls'," the elder Dorian began, 'may they prosper and grow old gracefully together. And to Samantha, a very happy 27th birthday . . . would that I could remember back that far." Aurora jabbed her playfully in the ribs. She lifted her glass high then touched each of the other glasses reaching out to hers. The maitrê de awaited her approval of the vintage then sent a waiter to the table to begin explaining the brunch specials.

Aurora and Samantha sat talking while Alex and Kelley debated over who would order what. When they finally agreed on the selections the rest of the brunch went smoothly. Samantha ended up sampling a portion of everyone's meal and the vacation was off to a marvelous beginning.

Aurora suggested taking a sidebar to the little gallery around the corner. She insisted it would be a good way to walk off the copious amount food they had just finished consuming.

"I want to familiarize Samantha with a few of my favorite shops." Aurora turned and whispered to the small blonde, "You'll just love the little rare map store we have here."

Trying to look interested Samantha responded, "Map store?" *Wow, just what I wanted to look at, Maps!* "Gee, that sounds like fun, Aurora." Samantha put on her most sincere smile and looked in Alex's direction for help.

"You think I'm crazy don't you?" the older woman grinned. "They aren't regular maps - wait until you see them. I don't want to spoil the surprise, but I know you'll fall in love with the place like I did."

"Okay you two," Kelley interrupted, "everything's taken care of, so let's get started. We have a lot to accomplish in a short amount of time."

"I don't think I'd consider 10 days a short period of time, Kelley. We should be able to do quite a few things while we're here. In fact, I made Alex write almost everything down."

Kelley gave Alex a questioning look when Samantha mentioned spending 10 days in the area and Alex tried to graciously deter her parent from asking any questions until she could get the woman alone and away from Samantha. She found that it was a feat that would not be too difficult to accomplish, as Aurora had taken the young woman under her wing and was determined to show her a marvelous day.

Slowing traveling Prospect Street the quartet stopped in or at almost every little shop along the way. It was truly an artist's utopia and there were crafts of every persuasion from fragrant soap and candle shops to pottery stores, stained glass stores and an array of jewelry boutiques. Aurora pointed out the rainbow flags and stickers on the outside of many of the shops and mentioned to Alex that she needed to take Sam up to Hillcrest while they were down visiting.

Samantha had gotten separated from the rest of the group when she found herself drawn to a small shop that specialized in gay and lesbian merchandise. All the books, magazines, cards, flags, stickers and trinkets in the exclusively gay establishment, awed her.

Lost in her own thoughts, the small blonde jumped when a hand suddenly touched her shoulder.

"Calm down, girl." The soft contralto voice carried a hint of laughter. "What's so enchanting that you can't hear your name being called?"

Samantha looked into Alex's clear blue eyes; "I was just carried away with all the variety in this place. Gods Alex, they have gay and lesbian themes on everything from coffee mugs to toilet paper.

"Yeah, this is a great little shop, but I think it's time to pull you away. Knowing you, we could be here for hours."

Reluctantly Samantha allowed herself to be led from the store. When they reached the sidewalk, Alex waved a small bag in front of the petite blonde.

"What's that?" Samantha asked, her eyes lighting up.

"An early birthday present," the tall beauty answered as she handed over the gift.

Opening the bag she pulled out a small box and opened it. "Oh Alex they're beautiful." She dangled one sterling silver, double female sign earring proudly for Aurora to see.

"Those are very nice. I think I have a set similar to that." Aurora commented. "Why don't you put them on?"

"I think I just might." She took off the earrings she was wearing and put them in the box, exchanging them for the new ones.

"I think there's something else in there," Alex mentioned, pointing to the bag.

Opening the package again Sam pulled out one of the rainbow bracelets she had been admiring; it consisted of a thin looped metal strung with a double row of staggered beads. The top row consisted of small glass beads in rainbow colors while the other row was of slightly larger beads made of hematite.

"Oh Alex. I love it." She hugged her lover then held out her arm for Alex to fasten the new bauble. When Alex went to fasten it, Samantha spotted a new adornment that Alex was sporting.

"You got yourself one, too. Let me see." She grabbed the taller woman's arm to examine the new purchase. It was similar to hers but there was only one row and it was of the sparkling rainbow beads; they were slightly larger than the ones Samantha was now wearing.

"Twins," the smaller woman smiled.

"Not exactly - they're similar but different." Alex smiled down at the woman she loved.

"Come on you two, time to break this up and get to the map shop." Aurora walked between the lovers and grabbed Samantha's hand, leaving Alex to walk with Kelly.

The shop wasn't far and within minutes the little group was transported back in time to an era when astronomy was in vogue. The walls were covered with masterpieces of intricacies. Aurora watched as Samantha took in the entire room.

"By the Gods, it's overwhelming!" Sam smiled over at Aurora.

"Come here let me show you one of my favorites," the older woman led Samantha to the back of the store and stood her in front of one the star charts. "I think you will really appreciate this one, Samantha."

Verdant eyes grew wide and distant as the young woman stared at the lesson in patience before her. "Aurora this is absolutely the most marvelous . . ."

"Isn't it though."

"Look at that unicorn and the delicate colors." She stepped closer to the piece. "Look how they've outlined the stars with the figures. There's Canis Major and Canis Minor, and look up there is Orion. You know I've always like astrology, the zodiac, and the constellations, but this . . ."

"Do you like it enough to own it, Samantha?" Kelley asked as she walked up and put her arm around Aurora's waist.

"Do I!" Samantha answered then looked at the price tag and shook her head. "Maybe someday."

"No, I think perhaps today. If we buy this for you then maybe I can talk Aurora into calling it a day. Alex and I are not big on shopping."

"Buy it for me - no Kelley, it's far too expensive." The small blonde shook her head.

"Nonsense," Aurora chimed in. "It's your birthday present from us. We didn't know what to get you and then I remember having seen this particular chart with the unicorn. I knew you had a fascination for them so . . ."

"I appreciate the thought, but really, it's just a little too much. Thanks anyway."

"Let them get it for you," Alex whispered in her ear.

She turned and looked up into sky blue eyes and shook her head. "I couldn't let them spend this much money on me, Alex it's over \$200."

"Honey, they have money to burn. It would make them happy."

"But Alex . . ."

"I heard that. Don't argue Sammie," Aurora interrupted. "I thought Alex said you read some of my books?"

"I have." Samantha answered.

"Well then, you should know that 'give and take' is a Universal law." She smiled sweetly at the younger woman, "Besides, it's rude to refuse a gift, and Kelley already told the owner we were taking it. Wait 'til we get home, I'll show you the one we have in the library. They're both 19th Century and by the same artist."

Knowing that refusal was futile, Samantha blushed slightly, nodded acceptance and smiled back at Alex's mother.

Aurora quickly changed the subject. "If you think the one we just bought is expensive, come here, little girl, let me show you another."

Taking Samantha's hand she walked her over to another wall and pointed to a decorative map of the Southern Sky. It was the product of a Dutch Cartographer and was an extremely busy piece. The tag on the frame caused Samantha's heart to skip a beat - the price was almost \$7,000.00.

"I guess the one you're getting for me is a steal along side this one. I don't know what to say."

"Thank you will do just fine," the older woman suggested.

"Thank you Aurora, and I'll make sure to thank Kelley, too."

"Come on, looks like they have it all wrapped and ready to go. Kelley is a lot like Alex, it's hard to keep her away from her home."

"Ah, so she gets that trait from Kelley. I didn't think it was from you, you're too much of a people person and touring is such a big part of your career. Come to think of it, Alex did a lot of traveling before she opened the Center."

"She traveled and she mingled, so does Kelley, but it's all part of the job. Given a choice, they would never leave home. Come on, Hon, they're waiting."

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It was almost 3 o'clock by the time they pulled into the driveway. Alex was dragging ass from exhaustion and even Samantha was beginning to feel a little fatigued. Aurora suggested that they take a quick tour of the villa and then a siesta. She mentioned that a full evening was planned and she didn't expect to be dealing with cranky people.

Alex agreed immediately and Samantha reluctantly. While Alex and Kelley were getting the luggage, Aurora showed Samantha around.

The house was huge. It looked to be built around a large courtyard, affording absolute privacy to the owners. Obviously designed for large parties there was a dance floor in the middle of the courtyard. Close to the northern wall there was a sunken Jacuzzi, and on the opposite side of the room a full sized bar, and barbecue pit. Many of the bedrooms and mini-suites opened out onto the courtyard, and those that didn't possessed balconies, which overlooked the ocean. A few of the larger bedroom suites on the second floor were equipped with private Jacuzzi tubs and access to both the courtyard and the ocean view. All together Samantha counted eight bedrooms, eight full and two half baths, a library, family room, movie room, and kitchen. There were both informal and formal dining rooms, and informal and formal living rooms. A second large Jacuzzi and a pool were situated on the west side of the villa and enclosed so they could still be used in the cooler months. The enclosure was screened during the warmer seasons and glassed in during the winter. For the guests who preferred direct sunlight there was an enormous deck jetting out from the swimming area. This deck, similar to the courtyard, sported a liquor bar and a grill.

Sam realized that with Kelley being a California realtor and Aurora an accomplished author that they probably were quite wealthy; she simply had never imagined what that kind of wealth could

buy. At least she never took the time to think about it. This villa was unbelievable. It was like walking onto the filming of 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,' she was flabbergasted. It never occurred to her that Alex came from such a distinguished family. Alex always seemed so down-to-life, not snotty or above anyone. The materiality of their lifestyle made her feel a little small and unworthy. She didn't know why but there was a minute nagging feeling, buried deep in her subconscious, one which actually wished that visiting La Jolla had been relegated to remaining in her dreams - the reality of the situation was larger than life.

The last stop on the tour was the celestial map that Aurora had hanging in the library. It was similar to Samantha's in that it was by the same artist, but it was of the constellations Scorpio and Libra. Aurora explained to Samantha that her zodiac sign was Libra and Kelley's was Scorpio; she fell in love with the work of art as soon as she spotted it. To Aurora, finding the ancient creation in the little off-the-beaten-track shop was an omen that they were meant to purchase the piece. Of course, Kelley never tried to dissuade her from buying it. From what Samantha observed so far, whatever Aurora wanted, Aurora got. It seemed as though Alex got a lot of her personality characteristics from her second mom. The star chart fit perfectly into the decorum of the library, along with the overstuffed chairs and love seat, the old globe and the wall-to-wall built in oak bookcases.

The two women walked back into the family room where they had left Kelley and Alex to discuss whatever it was they wanted, while Sam was being given the royal tour. Alex was sitting drinking a beer, but got up and offered to get them each a glass of wine. Aurora accepted the invitation, while the younger woman quickly declined.

"You know I think Aurora's idea of a short nap all the way around is an excellent idea." Samantha confided as Alex poured her mother a drink. "I think not sleeping, and then walking around all afternoon is finally catching up to me. Alex, you must be exhausted."

"Not too bad," the tall woman lied as she walked over to join her lover. "Ready to go bed?"

"Sure am. Your mother just pointed out your room, but we didn't even look in. I guess she figured I'd get to see enough of it during our visit. But before we go . . ." Sam walked over to Kelley and gave her a kiss on the cheek, thanking her for the lovely celestial map.

She joined her lover and offered her an arm. "Lead the way." Samantha looked up into eyes that matched two other sets in the room. "I feel like I'm odd womyn out," she laughed. "No matter where I turn in this room, I look into unbelievably blue eyes."

"Blue eyes are true eyes," Aurora offered. "And right now I can see at least one set that is having a difficult time staying open. You had best get her off to bed."

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It was a spacious room with a balcony that afforded the viewer in one direction a view of the city below and the ocean beyond that and in the other merely cliff, beach, and water.

"Was this your room when you were younger?"

"Yes, actually it was."

"I thought so, it looks like you."

"Is that good or bad."

"Neither. It's just an observation." The small blonde began to undress.

"Come here, you," the dark beauty ordered. "You look like you could use a little help getting out of those clothes."

"Oh no! I'm doing this myself - no funny stuff while we're here in your parent's house."

"What?! You've got to be kidding."

"No I'm as serious as can be. I wouldn't feel comfortable knowing that your parents might hear us."

"Samantha, their bedroom is at the Other end of the Villa. They would never hear us."

"I don't care, Alex. It's a matter of respect."

"For the Goddess' sake, this is ridiculous."

"Whatever, that's how I feel."

"We'll see if you still feel that way Days from now."

"Damn, I never thought about it that way. I don't want to go Days without making love to you or having you make love to me." She finished undressing and with just her panties left on, hopped into the bed. "But right now I'm still a little shy."

"A little shy are you?"

"Yeah."

"Then you should put a nightshirt on. You expect me to lay in bed with you half naked and behave myself?"

"Are you tired Alexis Dorian." The petite blonde asked sarcastically.

"Yes, Samantha Riley - I'm exhausted." The tall brunette answered in like tone.

"Then you should be able to sleep next to me if I'm completely naked and still go to sleep."



"Okay, you win this time." Alex quickly undressed and joined her lover under the covers.

They lay in bed with Samantha snuggled up to the warm muscular body of her lover, her arm around Alex's waist.

"What's planned for this evening, do you know?"

"I think Mom picked the place for dinner tonight. She hasn't even filled Kelley in on it. She wanted it to be special seeing how this is your first visit. Kind of a 'Welcome to the Family' affair. So let's get some shuteye. I think Mom expects to be up most of the evening and probably a good part of the morning."

Alex lifted the head on her shoulder, tilting it so she could lean down and kiss her lover for the first time in hours.

Soft malachite eyes looked up. "I love you Alex. Thanks for bringing me here."

"I love you, too, Samantha. To reiterate what Mom and Kelley said earlier, welcome to Cielo en Tierra." She gently kissed the golden crown as she embraced the body that clung so tenderly to her own.

Within minutes the two lovers were fast asleep in each other's arms.

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A knock on the door and the familiar voice of her mother brought Alex out of a deep slumber. She looked around the comforting room, her eyes searching for the clock that had always been set but rarely went off during her high school years.

"Come on sleepyhead, time to get up. It's almost seven. Your time of day - the moon's coming out." Warmth was what she felt whenever she held the small woman close to her and it was always an inner struggle to disentangle herself from the comfort of her lover's embrace.

"Samantha, it's time to get ready for dinner." Another smile as she thought of the key words used in awakening her princess.

"You're just saying that to get me up," Samantha mumbled softly from the vicinity of Alex's chest.

"No. No I'm not. Open your eyes - you'll see that the sun has done a vanishing act while you were conversing in dreams.

"Oh no!" Samantha bolted upright, blinking her eyes awake. "I missed my first La Jolla sunset. I didn't want to sleep through it."

"Samantha, it's very similar to the one we view at home, believe me."

"It's just that sunset is our special time and I wanted to start a tradition."

"Huh?"

"I thought it would be unique if we made it a tradition to watch the sunset on the first night whenever we were in a new place. I went and missed our first sunset in La Jolla."

"If it makes you feel any better, I missed it, too." Alex teased the disappointed woman now sitting upright beside her. "We can catch it tomorrow night, it really doesn't change all that much from day to day. I'll remember from now on and not let you nap during sunset time, okay?"

"Only on the first night in a new place." Samantha turned and gave her lover a hug.

"Let me go ask Mom how we should dress for dinner," Alex said as she threw her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. "I'll be right back." She grabbed a nightshirt and scurried out the door and down the hall.

Samantha lay back on the bed, her eyes searching the far distant waters, watching as white caps mounted the waves and rode them to shore. *Thank you, Powers That Be. I wouldn't trade my life with anyone in the world.*

She got up and looked around, finding Alex in all the memorabilia scattered throughout the room. One wall held a small trophy case holding small bronze and gold statues of girls in various sport positions, throwing, kicking, and hitting different sized balls. There was a softball that looked to have been signed by the entire team. Several montages graced the north wall. She wondered who instigated the mini works of art and who the photographer was in the family. Samantha noticed several others hanging throughout the house. *What a nice way of presenting the past and integrating it into the present* she thought as she stood closer to examine the two that hung on either side of the mirror.

On the right you could watch the young Alex grow from a small child to a teenager in the time it took to look over 20 or so pictures. Samantha smiled to herself, as she looked into the eyes of a toothless Alex, posing in her softball uniform. She loved the one of Alex caught in motion as she was throwing a martial art's punch at an unseen victim. Directly in the middle was professional photograph of Alex in her high school cap and gown, smiling proudly, holding her diploma in her hand, and being flanked by the two women in her life who loved her the most.

The second montage took up where the first left off. The main picture on this side of the mirror was also professionally taken at graduation, but Alex now held her college sheepskin, as she was again standing in the middle of her proud parents.

Her inspection was cut short by Alex's return.

"Mom said semi-casual which just means no shorts or jeans." She looked at Sam who was still staring intently at the final montage. "Mom refuses to take those down . . ."

"I would, too, if I were her. Alex this is the life of her baby . . ."

"Samantha . . ."

"No, you look - you may be all grown up but in your parent's eyes you're still their little girl. Look at this room." She spun around her arms wide open encompassing the entire area. This room is a shrine your mother has kept so she can come in and watch you grow all over again anytime she misses the sound of your voice or the sight of your pretty little face." Her green eyes began to mist as she empathized with a mother whose only child had grown up and moved away.

"You're reading way too much into this room, Sam . . ."

"No. I'm not. I can see it in the way your folks look at you Alex. I don't think you realize how much they love you."

"Sure I do. They're great."

The small blonde shook her head. "I don't think you really understand, but that's okay, I do. Your parents will be seeing a lot more of you now that I'm around."

"Okay, you win but sentimental time is over. You can look at these later. Kelley has made 8:30 reservations at the restaurant so we have not quite an hour and a half to get ready. Want to shower?"

"Yeah, I should think so. You want to go first?"

"No. We're showering together."

"But . . ."

"Samantha, don't be ridiculous. We did more than that when they visited us."

"But this is different."

"We're only going to shower - I promise I won't ravish you," sapphire eyes twinkled joyously, "I don't have time."

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Cutting it exceeding close to the 8:30 time limit, the foursome found themselves standing outside the front door of yet another of La Jolla's exquisite restaurants. Again the Dorians were greeted by name by both the valet and the maitrê de.

"I could get used to this kind of treatment," Samantha joked.

She was not expecting the response she received as Alex countered with, "And so you should, this is but the beginning, Samantha." The look in her lover's eyes was unreadable, but there was a glimmer of mischief hidden within the realms of her deep blue orbs. Samantha was about to take the conversation to the next level when Kelley held out a hand to the two of them letting them know they were about to be seated.

The group traveled through the entire restaurant, as they were being lead out onto what looked like a private patio. It was decorated with festive lighting and enclosed in glass with a retractable ceiling that could be closed during inclement weather. The thought of it being a private room was fleeting for as they approached the double doors leading into the room Samantha could see that there were already people seated at a large table.

She was so busy taking in the scenery and decorations that she hadn't focused any of her attention on the people, who were already in the room. Finally, concentrating on what was happening around her, she noticed that she had been correct the first time, there was only one huge table in the room and this was definitely a private affair. She searched the faces of the people seated at the table and her eyes, getting as big as saucers, filled with tears. Directly in front of her were Sonny, Ray, Suz, Danny and Sally. With her mouth agape she looked up at Alex, into eyes reflecting oceans of love and then back to the small gathering before her. The maitrê de positioned himself on the opposite side of the room and quickly snapped a picture of the entire group. One word, spoken simultaneously by eight of the people she loved most in the world, filled her ears as her heart overflowed with joy.

"SURPRISE!!"

Continued in Part 4.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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### ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## **Part 4**

### **Chapter 4**

Time stood still as Samantha's mind took in the scene set before her. Unable to move, she stood frozen, her face warming as color filled her cheeks. A moist path of happy tears streamed down her cheeks, and Alex's arm became positioned firmly around her shoulders.

"What in Tartarus . . ." were the first words out of the surprised woman's mouth.

"A little pre-birthday party. Didn't seem right to invite them from such distances for one evening, so we thought we'd make a weekend of it." A soft kiss graced flaxen hair before Alex led her lover toward the head of the table. But, there was no way she was going to be seated before greeting each of the guests individually.

Unable to contain himself until the petite blonde reached his seat, Sonny jumped up and met the dazzled woman halfway. "Hi, Sweetness. You didn't think we'd miss your first "family" birthday now did you?" Strong arms engulfed her, squeezing gently as he kissed her hello.

"Oh, Sonny. This is just too much. I never in my wildest . . ."

"Well, of course not, that's why we all got to say 'Surprise.'" It wouldn't have been much of one, if you'd been able to figure it out ahead of time, now would it?" Samantha received another hug and a peck on the cheek before he allowed her to move on to the next person.

"Happy Almost Birthday, Samantha," Ray interjected when Sonny relinquished his hold on their friend.

"I'm so happy to see you two." Samantha bent down to give him a welcoming kiss before turning to Suzanne.

"Hi stranger," the redhead greeted her friend. "You've been pretty scarce since moving into Paradise! Guess I have to wait for special occasions to be graced by your company."

"Oh, Suz." Samantha retorted as she turned, then looked at Danny and thanked him for bringing her friend.

Not being much of a conversationalist, Danny acknowledged the statement with a smile and a nod before returning his attention to the menu he had been intently studying.

Samantha hugged her friend again, "I'm so glad you came - this is incredible."

"Couldn't pass up a free weekend in La Jolla now could I?" Suzanne held her friend out at arm's length before passing her down to the only person in the room Sam had yet to greet. "You look marvelous, Sammie, Paradise is obviously good for you."

Finally, Samantha looked toward the end of the table and contact was made with eyes almost identical to her own. Her tears began anew. With arms outstretched the two sisters walked toward each other. Embracing with a grip that almost took their breaths away they stood, tears streaming down their faces, both at an uncharacteristic loss for words.

Alex put one long arm around each of the women and gave them a simultaneous hug, while leaning forward and whispering, "This was meant to be a happy occasion."

Giggling through the tears, Samantha released her hold on Sally. "It is! Oh, Alex, it most definitely is! This is the traditional 'Riley' greeting," she wiped the remainder of the salty drops from her face. "I don't know how to begin . . ."

"Let's try sitting down and looking at a menu," Alex suggested while guiding the sisters over to their prospective seats. She sat down herself and smiled at her parents as she mouthed a silent "Thank you."

The party participants were soon lost in small talk with discussions ranging from how and when everyone arrived, to when they planned on leaving. The topic of how to make the most use of the weekend seemed to rate high on everyone's list.

Throughout the evening, whenever Samantha thought about all the love and labor that went into arranging this little get together, she got flesh bumps and tingled all over. Every so often the small blonde would reach her arm under the table and gently squeeze Alex's leg, and each time she did so the taller woman would glance over at a face full of gratitude.

Entrees were soon ordered, running the gambit from Penne with Portabella, Shiitake, and Porcini mushroom sauce, to Fettucini in a garlic, onion and basil sauce. The house specials of shrimp and scallop dishes were also popular picks. The meals were undeniably gourmet creations. Quite out of character for the restaurant, the small group was served a family style salad, hot bread sticks, and a bottle of Merlot, which Kelley increased by ordering two more bottles.

Earlier in the day, Alex called and informed the chef that Tiramisu was one of Samantha's favorite desserts, and as it happened that very dish was one of his specialties. He informed Alex that he would personally be preparing and serving the piece de resistance to the birthday meal,

and true to his word, he lead the small troupe of wait people as they entered the private room to sing Happy Birthday in Italian to their Irish guest.

With the lights dimmed and the dessert ablaze, the chef entered, carrying his masterpiece. He arranged the individual ramekins containing the delicate Tiramisu in a circle, so the small dishes resembled a birthday cake. There was a larger ramekin in the center of the circle and in between each of the small dishes he positioned ladyfingers so as to form an inner border between the small ramekins and the larger one. Candles, protruding from the delicate cakes, lit up the room, while a sparkler flickered brilliantly in the centralized Tiramisu.

Although the celebration was a little premature, Alex explained to her lover that they would not be back here on the actual birthday, and the staff wanted to do a little something special for Aurora and Kelley's new family member.

For the umpteenth time this evening Samantha found her face flushing rose as she watched the chef proudly place his creation in front of her. The singing began and as Samantha bent over to blow out the candles, she did her best to think of a wish to make that had not already been granted.

Over dessert, the consensus was formulated that the weekend would be filled with two of the San Diego area's biggest attractions. Saturday would find the small group at Sea World and they all decided that Sunday would be an excellent opportunity to visit the San Diego Zoo.

It was nearing the witching hour when Aurora suggested they take the party back to the villa for a night cap and a fairly decent retirement time so they would all be at least somewhat rested in the morning. She informed the little troupe that Sea World was not the place to tackle on a scant amount of sleep.

Suz and Danny drove down so they had their own car. Sonny and Ray picked up a rental car at the airport where they stayed and met Sally before bringing her with them to the restaurant. Alex coordinated the flights so the guys had arrived within an hour of Sally's landing. She faxed Sonny a photo of Sam's sister earlier in the week and told him to simply look for a slightly younger rendition of Samantha with long hair. As it turned out he didn't need to look at the photo, his first glance at the young woman left no doubt in Sonny's mind that she was Samantha's sister. The three of them got to know each other on the way up from San Diego and by the time they arrived at the restaurant were fairly good friends. Piling into cars they all headed back to the villa.

Minutes later with everyone mulling around the kitchen area, Kelley proposed a brandy nightcap to relax everyone before she herded them all off to bed. The early morning moon was shining brightly through the glass doors as Kelley led the small group out onto the veranda. Far below, the water was hooded by moonbeams, and the illuminated white caps cast a mystical glow from the vista on the villa deck. As Samantha looked down, the heavenly light cascading across the stretch of land below captured the flecks of sand, causing them to sparkle like millions of diamonds scattered across the beach.

"A penny for your thoughts." A soft contralto voice broke the small blonde's reverie.

Sam looked up into velvet blue eyes. "I was thinking it must be in the genes. Your family seems to have a knack for finding Paradise here on Earth."

"It's a beautiful view, isn't it?"

"Almost as beautiful as the one from our penthouse." Samantha put her arm around Alex's waist and they stood quietly for a minute caught in the magic of the moment, until Sonny approached, breaking the spell. Alex kissed Samantha on the cheek and left the two friends to chat, while she meandered over to join Kelley.

Danny loosened up a little after a glass or two of wine and became fast friends with Ray, as the two stood in the middle of the deck talking. Suz found Aurora fascinating and cornered the older woman for some advice on positive thinking. Sally, who originally was searching for her sister amongst the little group, decided to join the author and her new disciple. She decided that some positive affirmations would be a definite plus to assimilate and take back with her to Washington. Things were not going smoothly at home and she didn't know how she was going to tell Samantha that their parents were on the rockiest of roads and that their relationship was heading for destruction.

When the party began breaking up, Samantha got her chance to take Aurora aside. She wanted to personally thank her hostess for allowing the entire group to call the villa home for the weekend and for making her birthday so special.

"We love doing it, Samantha." Aurora admitted. "This place doesn't see half the excitement it used to. It's a pleasure to hear the rooms come alive with voices other than Kelley's and mine." She kissed the younger woman and shooed her back toward her guests.

It was close to one o'clock by the time Alex and Samantha walked each of the couples and Sally to their perspective accommodations.

At her sister's door Samantha embraced the younger version of herself. "We'll get some time to talk this weekend, I promise. Maybe while we're walking around Sea World or the zoo. I'm so glad you made it down."

Alex motioned that she would meet Sam in their room and the blonde acknowledged that she would be right along. "Take your time, Samantha. Good to see you again, Sally. 'Nite."

"Good night, Alex and thank you again."

"Think nothing of it." The tall, graceful woman turned her back to the sisters and walked quietly away.



"I don't believe Alex did this," Samantha started. "But I couldn't be more pleased. You know it would have been the first birthday ever without you, Mom, and Dad. I guess Alex knew how hard that would have been on me. Isn't she incredible?"

"Yes, Sammie, she is. I believe I told you that when I first met her. You're one lucky leprechaun." She laughed, remembering back to when their mother used to affectionately call them by that name.

"Now you're beginning to sound like Mom," Samantha chuckled, smiling at her little sis. "Listen, Hon, you best get some sleep. I hear that Sea World is huge and we all need to be fresh and awake in the morning. As I said before, we'll talk tomorrow. I'm so glad you're here. Good night, Sally." She kissed her sister on the cheek, still giddy from the surprise hours earlier.

"Good night Sammie - you don't know how good it is to see you and see how happy you are with Alex. You've really found your niche in the world." A slight sadness could be seen in the verdant eyes looking back at Sam's.

Knowing her sister well, Samantha could tell there was a sigh in Sally's voice, an unspoken sadness. "Is every okay at home - other than the fact that I'm gay?"

"Pretty much, Sam. But you're right, we need to get some sleep tonight, or rather this morning, and we can talk some tomorrow. Good night."

Samantha turned and walked away as her sister silently closed the door. A slight damper was put on the feeling she had been enjoying all evening as she glanced back at the closed door wondering where the sadness in her sister's otherwise joy filled eyes came from.

The door to their suite was ajar and she entered to find Alex sprawled across the bed, hands under her head, eyes closed. The tall woman had already changed out of her clothes and into a nightshirt. Samantha stood, staring at a vision of beauty; Alex's thick dark hair when left to its own devices fell fluidly along the curves of her strong angular face creating a portrait of absolute elegance. *My beautiful dark Angel* she whispered to herself, the sight of the gorgeous brunette warming her heart. Concluding that Alex looked too peaceful to awaken, the small blonde quietly shut the door and began to tiptoe past the bed.

Seconds later she realized that she should have known better than to try to sneak past her dark hero, just as she reached the bathroom door, sapphire eyes jolted open and the sleeper did awaken.

"Since you're awake . . ." Samantha started as she turned back toward the bed; "Sally told me you paid for her round trip flight. And what's with the "free weekend in La Jolla" Suz mentioned? I also noticed no one made a move to help with the dinner tab. Alex, what's going on . . . this is to extravagant for a birthday party."

"Wow . . . back up . . . slow down! This isn't just a party, it's a birthday weekend, and it's your first birthday with me. I want to make it something to remember." She sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed, tucking one long leg under her, while letting the other dangle to the floor.

"You didn't need to do anything to accomplish that, just being with you would have been enough to remember. I'd like to help with Sally's plane fare." Sam stood beside the bed, her leg touching Alex's swaying one.

"No way - don't be ridiculous, Samantha."

"Why is it ridiculous to not want you to have to foot the entire bill for this weekend. Did you pay for Sonny and Ray to come down, too?"

Strong arms surrounded the small waist and Samantha found herself being draw onto the bed next to her lover.

"No, I didn't. Listen, I'll talk business with the guys sometime tomorrow, and they'll rack this one up on their expense account, just like we'll do when we go up there in October. But Sonny wouldn't have missed this for the world even if they couldn't use it as a business expense."

"I don't want you spending this much money on me, Alex. I get uncomfortable."

"Listen Samantha, remember we said we'd talk about money?"

"Yeah."

She ran graceful fingers through the soft golden hair of Samantha's head with a gentle massaging motion. "This is not the time. Just take my word for it that this little shindig is not even putting a dent in my allowance." She smiled down at her lover and kissed her gently on the lips. "I want this weekend to be the best, no thoughts of that evil green stuff - okay."

"Did you say Allowance? I haven't received an allowance since I was in high school. Do you have a money tree planted somewhere in this villa or something?"

"Something like that. And I guess I've said allowance since I was in high school - I have a trust fund and get a monthly stipend." Her strong arms wrapped around the small body practically sitting on her lap. "I love you Samantha."

"Must be some Stipend! And . . . I love you, too. But how will I ever be able to thank you for this."

"Hell, that's easy - you could let me make love to you tonight."

"Alex, I told you how I feel about making love in your parent's home."

"And I told you they are at the opposite end of the villa. You want me to try to call them?" She opened her mouth in an attempt to yell.

Small fingers reached up and covered her mouth.

"No! Alex, don't!" Samantha begged.

"But Samantha . . ."

"How would they ever have known if something was wrong in this end of the house if you can't hear from one end to the other?" The blonde queried.

Alex got up and strolled over to the light switch. Samantha noticed for the first time that there was a camouflaged intercom on the wall. "Watch and listen - this place is sound proof." Beginning slowly and softly, but ending in a vibrato crescendo, Alex began to vocalize. "Aaah, ooh, humm, S-a-m-a-n-t-h-a, oh Samantha!!"

The small blonde wanted to crawl under the bed. Feeling the blood rushing to her face, she ran to stop Alex from opening the portal to the rest of the villa, but the larger woman picked her up at the waist, holding her tightly as she proceeded to open the door. While continuing to dangle the flailing Samantha, Alex looked in both directions down the lengthy hallway. Satisfied that no adjacent doors were opening, she set the small woman onto her feet, closed their door and went to the intercom.

"I told you this place is sound proof, and it rambles forever," she smiled.

Before Samantha's small hands could stop her, the dark-haired beauty flicked a switch on the communication device. "Mom!"

Green darts flew from Samantha's eyes as she shook her head at the smiling brunette.

A few seconds later there was a response. "Yes, Alex?"

"Did you just hear me scream?"

"Don't be silly, you know we can't hear anything from your end of the complex. Why were you screaming?"

"Just proving a statement to a certain Doubting Thomas who would want to see Christ's puncture wounds before believing," she chuckled into the intercom.

"And just why would you need to prove such a point," Kelley's voice boomed through.

"Um . . ."

"Never mind, Dear, we don't need to know," her mother giggled as the younger women on the other end of the line could hear her hushing Kelley and shooing her away from the system. Cheerfully she added, "Samantha - for the most part the villa is sound proof - it was purposely done so people could sleep while others were partying . . . have fun, girls, but do get some sleep."

"Nite Mom."

"Good morning, Alexis." The intercom went dead.

"Now look what you've done!" Samantha whined as Alex closed the box.

"What?"

"You know what!"

"Don't you think they know . . ."

"But you didn't have to let them know that tonight . . ."

The tall beauty grabbed the small blonde and drew her into a passionate embrace. "Don't deny me tonight . . . this morning, Samantha." Running slender fingers through the flaxen hair, the taller woman leaned over and buried her face in the golden silk. "You smell so sweet."

"Alex, my knees are buckling."

"We can rectify that." Gently she lifted the love of her life into arms that showed no strain at the weight. Final destination was the sliding glass door leading out onto a small deck. Without having to reposition her precious cargo, she opened the door and stepped through. "Smell the fresh ocean breeze. Look at this heavenly view. Samantha, you were born to gaze upon such beauty as a daily occurrence. The world is yours to command, Samantha. Anything you want, just ask for it; if it's within my power to get it, it's yours."

"Alex, you can be such a poet when the mood hits. As long as I have you beside me, I can't see that anything else would matter." Putting her small hands on either side of the beautiful face she loved, she drew it down to meet hers, planting a kiss on eager lips, her tongue slowly reaching the inner depths of the moist sanctuary. "I think it's the thought of making love under your parent's roof that's turning you on, my dark-haired beauty . . . not me. It's the temptation of the forbidden fruit in the garden."

"Samantha." Alex objected, "I don't now and never have had the restrictions put upon me that you obviously experienced. I don't find making love under my parent's roof forbidden territory."

Sam squirmed trying to disengage herself from the strong arms that now refused to release their hold. "Oh, so now you're telling me I'm not the first woman you've made love to in this

bedroom? Is that supposed to turn me on?" As instantaneous as a flipped switch, the mood was broken and replaced by a defensive feeling, a jealousy for those who had come before her.

Giving the smaller woman her way and loosening her hold, she lowered Samantha until her feet were touching the floor and then followed the now angry woman back into their suite.

"Why do you have to look at everything from such an acute angle. Why not believe instead that you're going to be the last woman I ever have in this bedroom?"

"I don't think I want to make love in a bed that has been occupied by your former lovers." All of a sudden the conversation turned from one of seduction to one of accusation.

Exasperated, Alex sighed, pulled a reluctant Samantha close and tilted the smaller woman's face to look up into her own deep blue eyes, quickly meeting troubled emerald orbs. "I'm only going to say this once so listen very carefully. I told Mom to throw the mattress away when I broke up with Nikki. I warned her that if it was still around when I visited that I would set the damn thing on fire. She went one step further and bought a brand new bed. This is one of those new air beds," she grinned at the look on her lover's face. "Not the Camping store airbed, Samantha. It's a little more refined than that. Even you should know my Mom by now -- this is called an Air Support Sleep System and," she picked up the control lying on the nightstand, "we each have our very own control so you can adjust your side of the bed. We can christen the bed right now if you want." She grinned again at the dumbfounded look on Samantha's face.

"Well - that certainly was a change of topic if I've ever heard one. Did they ask if you'd do a commercial for them after you tried the bed?"

"No, smart ass - but they did ask Mom if she would." Alex was now displaying a full smile, knowing she had once again gotten her Samantha back and dispersed the green giant that seemed to lie in wait beneath the surface of her lover's heart. "But of course, she refused."

Samantha sat down on the bed and pushed on the mattress. "It really is rather comfortable." A smile also spread across her face as she reached out a beckoning arm, fingers wiggling in the direction of her lover. "Come here, you."

Not needing a second invitation, Alex closed the glass door and pounced onto the bed next to her lover. "I'll bet you were an impossible child. Just when your mom was ready to punish you, you probably turned on that irresistible smile and melted her heart."

"I don't remember it ever happening that way," Samantha smiled as she put her arms around Alex. "Sweetheart, there's nothing I'd like more than to spend the next couple of hours braided around your body, but it's after 1:30 in the morning and the guests you so graciously invited to spend the weekend with us have all gotten a head start on sleep. Between the excitement, the dinner, and the booze, if I don't get some shut eye soon, you will never be able to get me up in the morning . . ."

"Okay, okay, you don't have to draw me a picture. To tell you the truth I'm more than a little tired myself," Samantha's dark angel smiled wickedly as she loosened the hold the smaller woman's arms had on her body, "especially after having to put on a show to convince you that this suite is like a tomb. I'm gonna let you call the shots - for now - but I don't intend to be put off tomorrow evening . . . deal?"

Taking the out offered her Samantha got off the bed and began to slowly undress. "Deal."

With a leering look and a clearing of her throat, Alex gave a warning. "I suggest you go into the bathroom to finish what you're doing, and come out with a nightshirt on if you don't want me to renege on my generosity this morning." The grin on Alex's face, advised Sam that any excuse would be enough to counter her previous statement and continue the course of seduction.

Samantha felt it best to abide by the rule just laid on the table and scurried into the bathroom, coming out a few minutes later, appropriately clothed in a sleeping shirt. She crawled into bed next to Alex and began playing with the bed's firmness control until Alex took it from her.

"I thought you said you were tired. If you can waste your time playing with that silly thing - I can certainly find something better to occupy you."

Samantha smiled as she scooted closer and snuggled into her sleeping position. Sheepishly she looked up into Alex's baby blues. "I was just testing you, I am tired and I know you are, too. I think I'm just excited about going to Sea World tomorrow. I feel like a kid. I've never had a birthday celebration begin three days Before my birthday."

"Well, there's always a first time." Alex kissed the crown of her lover's head as she gently wrapped her arm around the soft body lying beside her. "Are you as excited as you were about coming down here?"

"Pretty close." Samantha answered.

"Does that mean I'm in for a lot of tossing and turning?"

"I don't think so, I think I'll be able to get to sleep. But, I was wondering while I was in the bathroom?"

"Oh, dear, that sounds like trouble!" The tall woman looked down at her lover, her eyebrow arching slightly.

"No . . . no trouble . . . I was just wondering why Aurora didn't use the intercom to wake us up earlier and why you didn't use it to find out where we were going for dinner?"

"If you must know, my little inquisitor, Mom was doing a final check on the guest rooms in this corridor when she woke us up, and I needed to go talk to her and make sure everyone had arrived okay. You wouldn't have wanted us to spoil the surprise now would you?"

"No, I guess I wasn't thinking about that." She snuggled in closer, giving Alex a tender squeeze.

Long fingers caressed Samantha's back, feeling the warmth of the skin beneath the nightshirt increase as she slowly slid her hand up and down the slender body.

"By the Gods that feels marvelous," Samantha cooed. "I'll give you three days to stop."

"And I'll give you ten minutes to be breathing steadily and lost in dreams. If you aren't . . . all bets are off and there will be no sleep until the sun joins us."

Before closing her eyes and drifting off to the land of Nyx, Samantha let her eyes travel to the brightest star shining its light through the glass door. She thought of a wish that was yet to be granted and squeezed her lover tightly one last time before allowing the God of dreams to carry her away.

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The direction of the suite was almost due west, and the morning sun did not shower the rooms in first light. Nevertheless, Alex's automatic alarm did not fail to announce the event. She glanced over at the clock and decided another hour would not do anyone any harm. Samantha had experienced some restlessness during the hours they slept and the small blonde ended up a few inches away from but still facing her, one small hand reaching out and keeping contact with Alex's body. The dark-haired beauty looked over at her life partner and smiled. *I will love you forever, Samantha. I want you to be the first sight to greet my eyes each morning until the day I'm called to leave this Earth.* She kissed her fingers and placed them gently on the forehead of her lover. *Sleep a while longer, my Precious, the day is here to do your bidding.*

Quietly she rolled over and put her feet on the floor, reaching back to make sure Samantha had a pillow to take her place when she left the comfort of the bed. It was useless to lay there and try to sleep. After using the bathroom she decided to head for the kitchen, almost positive she would find Kelley already there.

The halls were bathed in a soft pink light coming from the skylights that dotted the entire villa. Figuring Ray would also be up and wondering what to do with himself, she tapped softly on the guys' door as she passed and slowed her pace, giving him time to answer.

"Hey, wait up Alex," he half-whispered as he hurried to catch up. "I was hoping you'd be awake."

"You know your way around, you could have meandered into the kitchen without me."

"Yeah, but it's always better to have company," he confessed as he put an arm around his friend.

"So, how much longer shall we give them to sleep?" Out of the corner of her eye she saw another door crack open slightly. "Come on out, you're not the only one awake," she notified the nonsleeper.

Danny poked his head out about the time they reached the room. "Good morning. You two headed for coffee?"

"I'm a tea drinker, but we have both - join us."

"So," she reiterated, "how much longer?"

"Let's see, Sea World opens at what, 10 o'clock?"

"Yes."

"And it's not the busy season. I'd say let them have another hour. We could have breakfast made by that time, get them up, eat, and then go. What do you think?" He turned his attention first to Danny and then to Alex.

"Suz will probably be up within the hour," was Danny's answer.

"Samantha would sleep all day, and I think her sister has similar sleeping habits, but an hour will be sufficient. Making breakfast is a great idea. Mom's probably still asleep so it will be the four of us cooking. You any good at making toast, Danny."

"My specialty," he grinned up at the woman walking next to him.

"All right, one hour and breakfast it is." Alex brushed her hands together in a 'that's that' gesture and put an arm around the shoulder of each of the men flanking her.

Just as Alex anticipated, when they approached the kitchen area, Kelley was sitting in the breakfast nook already sipping her first cup of tea. She also had a pot of coffee brewing, as she knew Sonny would throw a hissy fit if he awoke and there was no caffeine. The Three Musketeers arrived and filled Kelley in on their plan. She agreed that feeding everyone before going to the park was an excellent idea and the foursome started preparing the morning meal.

Forty-five minutes later, while Danny was completing the table setting and Ray was getting the juice and condiments, it was decided that Alex would be the one to go arouse the sleepers as she could enter all four rooms with no drawbacks.

Within ten minutes Alex returned with four half-awake individuals, all still sporting sleepy expressions.

"My, don't we look bright eyed and bushy tailed?" Kelley addressed the four younger people. She turned to Alex questioningly, "Where's your mother?"

"She'll be here; you know she has to make her entrance." She smiled over at her parent as she pointed Samantha in the direction of the table. "Go . . . sit . . . I'll get you some tea."



"Thanks, Honey." Not much for early discussions the small blonde did as she was bid. Sonny, Sally, and Suzanne followed suit as Ray and Danny began serving.

"These smell wonderful," Sonny announced, as a plate of pancakes was set in front of him. "Isn't anyone else hungry?"

"Mind your manners," Ray scolded. "You have new friends who don't need to find out your bad habits so soon."

"Bad habits," Sonny whined. "It's just that between Samantha and me - there's not enough of these for anyone else." He smiled over at his friend who was more than happy to join in the fun.

"Agreed - I think the two of us could polish these off nicely," Sam smiled as she reached for the plate.

Two strong hands stopped her in mid-reach. "Touch that plate before everyone is seated and the two of you will sit and Watch the rest of us chow down - You got that?" The tone was intimidating but the twinkle in the sparkling blue eyes belied the words.

"Oh, all right," Samantha sighed putting her arms to her sides in mock humility. "We'll share. You'll just have to buy us lunch earlier." She grinned broadly over at Sonny who winked at her before throwing up his hands in feigned surrender.

Aurora arrived just as the last of the meal was being brought to the table and the little group descended upon the bounty with voracious appetites.

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Breakfast was devoured with minimal conversation, save to discuss the events they were planning to take in on today's venture. Sam, Sally, Sonny and Suz pulled K.P. while the rest of the group started with showers. There was no way everyone was going to be able to shower at one time and doubling up was not a good idea, as time was becoming of the essence.

Less than two hours later and with only a short 15-minute drive, the van pulled into the Sea World parking lot a little after 10 a.m. Cameras were out and the first pictures of the day were snapped in front of the sign leading into the park.

Discussion on the way to the park established that they were going to take in some of the walk around exhibits early, the water rides during the heat of the day and shows in between. Main attraction for the day was going to be a swim with the Dolphins.

Kelley and Alex went up to the ticket booth while the rest of the entourage waited out front discussing how much fun the day was going to be.

"What do you think is taking them so long," Samantha asked Aurora. "Do you think there's some kind of problem?"

"No. They have to get different tickets for some of the events we called ahead and scheduled. I'm sure Kelley wants to make sure everything has been taken care of before we get there." She smiled over at the young blonde, "So, have you or your sister ever been here before?"

"No, we went to Disneyland once but never here to Sea World - I love the ocean and the animals that live in it - this is really exciting."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Hon. We have an exhausting day planned and we want everyone to come away feeling like today was really special. Unfortunately, with the winter hours already started we have a shorter period of time to do everything. More than likely you and Alex will have to come back down some other time to see what we miss today. Lucky for all of us the Santa Ana is still going strong and bringing in summer weather." She looked over in the direction of the ticket booths. "Here they come, are we all ready?"

A communal "Yes!" greeted her ears. Alex and Kelley smiled at each other, knowing that their private cheerleader was probably rallying the troupe to enhance the mood.

"So, where to first Alex?" An eager Samantha started to link her arm in Alex's, but stopped, remembering they were out in public. Alex caught the trepidation and guilty look on her lover's face and proceeded to place an affectionate arm around Samantha's shoulders. She bent down and whispered, "I'll walk with you however I please, and if we get any odd glances, I'll kiss you and really give them something to gawk at." Samantha smiled up at the one she loved.

"You are something else, Alexis Dorian."

"That's why you love me." Alex squeezed her slightly and let go so they could maneuver through the turnstiles. Park maps in hand, the little group headed toward the Forbidden Reef where they could view hundreds of exotic undersea creatures, including moray eels. Aurora informed them that they only had a half an hour before they were due to meet the dolphins, so it was a rather hurried walk through.

On the way over to the dolphin interaction pool, while Alex was chatting with Sally and Suz and trying to get Suzanne to change her mind about not swimming with the dolphins, Sam overheard Ray and Sonny bickering about not being given the chance to help pay for their involvement. From what she could gather Alex and her parents were footing the entire bill. Doing the math she came up with \$360 plus tax just to get in. This was definitely getting to be a very expensive weekend and the small blonde began feeling a little uncomfortable. A discussion was definitely called for before a fortune was spent, but she didn't know how to broach the subject. If she waited until they got back to the villa it would be too late. She promised herself that first chance she could manage she would get Sonny to the side first and see what was going on.

Aurora fixed the first little adventure so that theirs was the only group involved. They gathered in a classroom environment to receive a lesson in dolphin physiology and anatomy, as well as being educated about the bottlenose dolphin's history and reproductive habits. After the chalkboard and video portion of the training was completed it was time to play with the friendly mammals. Unable to coax Suz, Kelley or Aurora into joining them in the water, the daring

sextuple disappeared to don their wet suits. They emerged within minutes to join the instructors in the shallow lagoon, while the perpetually dry trio watched the shenanigans from a safe distance on a man-made beach.

"Don't worry," Alex told her little clan, "Wait 'til later, we'll get them all wet!"

"I can't believe we getting to do this," Samantha whispered to her sister.

"Me either, what an adventure."

The remainder of the 90 minutes the six 'happy campers' spent in the water, interacting with the dolphins as the friendly mammals played, swam, and ate. They were even instructed in how some of the training signals worked. Each one of them personally swam with a dolphin and Kelley captured it all on the digital camcorder.

At the end of the 90 minutes the six totally satisfied customers went back into the locker room to change while Suz, Aurora, and Kelley waited in the gift shop.

"Okay kids," Kelley gathered everyone around her, "we've just about enough time to take in the Shipwreck Rapids. I've booked us for lunch at the Shipwreck Reef Café where the ride will drop us off and we are scheduled for a tour of the park at 2:15.

"Wow, you have everything on a timetable," Suz blurted out, then covered her mouth, embarrassed at her blurb.

Kelley just smiled and agreed with her, "Yes, we've found if you want to see the most possible and you only have one day, it's best to have a plan. We've been here often enough to know what's the most interesting the first time through. Of course the dolphin pool is rather new and not a lot of people get to experience that particular exhibit.

"I don't know if anything is going to top that experience today," Sonny admitted.

"When are we going to see the Shamu show?" Sally asked to no one in particular.

"Shamu, Baby Shamu, and Namu will be close to last on the list, Hon. You'll understand why later. Of course you won't be in the water with them, but they put on one helluva show" Aurora smiled and put a motherly arm around Sally's waist as they walked toward the fairly new ride.

The early afternoon sun with the help of the Santa Ana had the temperature soaring into an unseasonable 90 degrees, which made the raft-like inner tube ride even more enjoyable. Roaring waterfalls sprayed mist as they floated by after plunging through underground caverns, spinning and splashing through rapids and dodging obstacles along the way. Smiling faces disembarked as they stepped off in view of the five-theme restaurant.

"Where are we dining, Kelley," Alex asked, being the last to leave the raft.

"I thought we'd try the Jungle Garden; it seemed suitable for this little band of misfits." She motioned the direction and Alex with Samantha on her arm, led the way.

"Wow," seemed to be Suzanne's favorite word. "Look at this place, it's huge!"

After giving their name, the group was led by a person, dressed for a safari, to their table overlooking the water. Gleeful shrieks of patrons still aboard the rafts were accented by tropical bird calls and the distinct roar of sea lions. Tropical trees, flowers, and bushes were strategically placed throughout the area making the guests feel like they had just entered a tropical paradise.

"This is so great," Sally told Aurora.

"We think it's pretty special."

"Do you come here often?"

"We have season passes. Sea World is always a good place to bring visitors - so to answer your question - yes. We've been coming to here since Alex was little and have watched it grow right along with her. When she was six hardly any of these large attractions were here. It was mostly animal shows when we first started coming."

"Well, it's a wonderful place for young and old alike. Maybe someday I'll get to bring my Mom down here and we can all do this again."

"That sounds like fun, Sally."

"But we'll do the treating." The young woman smiled into kind sapphire eyes. "You don't know how much I appreciate all that you and Alex and Kelley have done to make Sammie's birthday so special." Tears welled up in emerald eyes and were batted quickly back.

Aurora patted Sally on the shoulder, "Don't you worry yourself about who's paying for what - this is just a special little outing for us. We're having a great time sharing our little part of the world with you kids. Samantha is very dear to us already, she's like a second daughter. You tell your mother that for me, will you?"

"Yes, Aurora, I will - thank you."

"Hey, you two gonna stand there gabbing all day or are you going to join the rest of us and eat?" Kelley interrupted the motherly chat.

"We're coming, Honey. We were just admiring these plants over here." Aurora lied as she gave the young woman time to compose herself.

Lunch was a delectable offering of vegetables, fresh-grilled seafood, meat, salads, stir fry, sandwiches, tropical fruits, and fresh-baked desserts, as chefs cooked on open grills made from salvaged lifeboats. The atmosphere was euphoric and smiles were worn by all.

During lunch Samantha decided to ask Sonny about the expenses that were accumulating and being taken care of by the Dorians alone.

"Sonny," a hushed voice assaulted his ear, as small fingers tugged on his shorts.

He turned and eyed his friend questioningly. "What Samantha, something wrong? Why so quiet?"

"I want to ask you something and I don't want anyone else to hear."

"As if they would, the only way anyone can hear you right now is if you shout. Hey, look at that parrot, Samantha, isn't it beautiful?"

"Sonny, I'm serious."

"Okay, you have my undivided attention. What's bothering that pretty little head of yours?"

"It's all the money Alex, Aurora, and Kelley are spending on this weekend. I'm beginning to feel funny about letting them pay for everything." Concerned eyes stared into gentle ones.

"Listen, Little One, the Dorian family has more money than they could ever imagine spending, believe me. Ray and I were having this discussion earlier because he thought we ought to at least offer to pay for something, but Alex gave us strict instructions before we arrived that the entire weekend was on her. Believe me when I tell you a couple thousand dollars for a day's adventure is noth . . ."

"Did you say a couple thousand?" Her voice rose an octave, but she tried to keep the intensity down. "Just for today?"

"Sure, that little dolphin venture was about \$125 a head. Then there was admission and lunc . . ."

Almost choking on a bite of salad she exclaimed, "By the Gods, Sonny - I can't let them do this!" She turned to address her partner.

Grabbing her by the shoulders, he turned her back around, but Alex already sensed something amiss. "Look, Sammie . . . over there." Sonny tried to act nonchalant, ignoring the raised eyebrow and slight frown from the direction of the dark-haired beauty on the other side of Sam.

Playing into his charade, Samantha responded, "Oh my, that is a beautiful bird." Her face was slightly flushed as she turned and spoke to Alex. "Look over there, Honey, what kind of parrot is that."

"Don't know." Alex gave her a questioning look. "If you're really interested we could ask the attendant."

"No, that's okay - it's just so pretty."

"Yeah." She eyed Sonny who had returned to eating his lunch. "You having a good time, Samantha?"

"The best ever, Alex. I can't believe how big this place is."

"It sure has grown since I first came. I think I was about six or seven when the folks brought me here. Half of this stuff wasn't even thought of yet."

"Looks like your mom is almost finished with her meal. Guess I'd better finish, too. I think she probably has the rest of the afternoon planned out."

"I'm sure she does; they've been here so many times she's pretty good at getting the most seen in a short day. Of course the dolphin swim took up a hunk of time and I think she has us scheduled for a private tour after lunch."

"A private tour?"

"Yeah, Mom's something of a local celebrity and it does warrant preferential treatment occasionally. Lucky us, huh?"

"Yeah, lucky us."

"Samantha is everything okay with you? Are you sure you're enjoying yourself." Worried eyes searched the freckled face before them.

"Alex, I'm having the time of my life and so is Sally. It's just that you're spending so much money and not allowing anyone to help."

"I thought we decided not to talk about that today."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Not whatever Samantha. Please - this is the way I want it. Okay."

Squeezing Alex's knee she let her lover know that whatever she wanted was definitely okay with her. "Okay Alex, nuff said." She made a motion of zipping her lips and returned a smile to her face, which in turn lit up her lover's face as well.

Music permeated the air, and throughout the rest of the meal the patrons got treated to exotic animals appearing on small stages with their trainers as castaway characters meandered through the various areas, entertaining everyone they came into contact with.

Looking around the table Aurora announced that the next stop was a behind the scenes walking tour that would help alleviate the stuffed feeling they were all experiencing. Everyone followed along behind the leader and for the next 90 minutes learned about how all the animals were cared for in the different regions of the park including the newer Wild Arctic attraction. They got to go

inside the environment of the otters and Danny, Ray, Sonny and Sally got chosen by the guide to feed the sharks. At one point Sonny stated that he felt like he was back in school for a day as the guide informed the group of how beached animals got rescued and the procedures that were involved before releasing them back to their homes. Because it was a VIP tour they were privy to areas not normally shown. When the tour was over, everyone clamored around Aurora begging her to agree to adding the Wild Arctic adventure to her list, before they were to take in the last Shamu show of the day.

"Okay -- it seems to be a group consensus but I have to warn you that you're giving up seeing the Manatee exhibit. We don't have time to do both today and still see the whale show."

Everyone stuck to the idea that they wanted to go back and see the entire Arctic exhibit. The endangered manatees would be saved for a later visit.

The Arctic experience began with a simulated jet helicopter ride that flew the audience over the barren Arctic landscape with breathtaking views of monstrous glaciers and frozen tundra. The deafening sounds of an avalanche had the little group holding hands over ears, and more than one of the friends swore that they felt chilled when the 'copter dove into an ice cave to avoid being caught in the cascading wilderness.

The creatures of this frozen wonderland were absolutely magnificent, starting with the leviathans and ending with the most recent of inhabitants, the Arctic fox pups. Each of the human equivalents found a kindred soul in one or more of the animals, developing their own special bonds as the day slipped into late afternoon. Before leaving the land of ice and snow the guests toured the Base Station, including first hand viewing, touching and learning from research equipment, statistics and little know facts. Return to the 'real world' gave pause to a few moments of silence from the group before the chattering began anew, as they spoke amongst themselves of their Arctic exploration.

Aurora ushered everyone over to Shamu Stadium as they were but minutes from the start of the show. Because of having taken the behind-the-scenes tour earlier, their seating was reserved and in the very first row. After everyone was seated and quieted down a bit Sally noticed that Aurora and Kelley were no where to be seen.

"Hey Sis, where did your new mom's-in-law go?"

Turning around on the bench to scan the back of the stadium Samantha had no luck spotting the missing ladies.

"Alex . . ."

"What, Hon?"

"Where did your parents go?"

Doing a repeat of the motion Samantha performed, Alex also could not spot the two older women.

"Kelley probably wanted something to drink and Mom went with her for company. They've seen this show so many times they could probably lip synch the announcer." Her eyes sparkled as she smiled down at her lover and then over at Sally. "If it will make you feel better, I'll go make sure that's what they're doing."

"You don't have to Alex, you'll miss part of the show if you go."

"That's perfectly okay with me, I've been here almost as many times as my folks. There's not a whole lot you can do to a whale show to change things around for variety." She smiled broadly while getting up, almost as though there was a secret she wasn't revealing. Giving Samantha a quick peck on the cheek, she patted her lover's shoulder and started back up the aisle to the exit.

"Hey, where's Alex going?" Sonny questioned as the dark-haired woman disappeared into the crowd still being seated.

"To go make sure her parents are just getting some refreshments and that there's nothing wrong. They didn't say anything to anyone before taking off."

"Well, we must all make sure to scold them when they do return, you know that's what they would do if the tables were turned." He scooted closer to Samantha, but left room for Alex to sit when she returned. The music began and the so did the show.

About halfway through the performance it became quite apparent to those left seated in the front row why the Dorians had all taken off for places unknown. With a flick of a flipper, patrons in the first 13 or so rows became drenched with tank water, not once, but twice.

"Thank the Gods it's warm!" Samantha grinned as she shook her head, spraying Sonny all over again.

"Wait until I get a hold of your lover," Sonny retorted then laughed when he saw the look on Suzanne's face, forgetting his own sopping clothing.

"Not expecting a bath, huh Suz?" Samantha asked her friend.

"Most definitely not - I think the hostesses all knew this was going to occur. That's why they disappeared and to where? Does anyone know?"

"Somewhere safe and dry you can bet." Ray stated as he looked around searching for the disappearing trio.

Everyone was accepting the fact that wet was part of the entertainment when Shamu did a high leap into the air, splashing them again as gravity did its job, causing whale and water to collide.



Suzanne jumped up this time, turned to Danny and wanted to move back several rows. He shook his head no, pointing out that she was already drenched, there wasn't much use in relocating.

"Besides Suz, you'll be dry in no time. It's 90 some degrees out here. Consider it a free cooling off."

Within minutes a beaming Alex rejoined her dripping friends.

"Everyone having fun?"

It was then that the friendly fireworks began, starting with Sonny and Sam, followed by Suz and Sally. Ray and Danny refused to join in the pity party, as they considered themselves lucky for having a break from the heat of the day and continued to watch the performance, undaunted by the shenanigans going on all around them. In actuality the rest of the group was glad for the wetting also, it was just fun to give Alex a hard time about the entire ordeal.

By the time the show was finished everyone was almost totally dry; affectionate complaints had been replaced by thank you statements to the three benefactors of the day.

"So we have about an hour left? What's next?" Samantha put her arm around Alex's waist and looked up into the sapphire eyes she loved.

"Are you hungry?" Alex asked.

"Yeah! But I don't want to leave the park before it closes. I can wait until then." She looked around the group. "Does everyone want to stay until the last whistle blows?"

An affirmative all the way around brought a smile to the taller woman's face.

"Tell you what - why don't we meet up with Mom and Kelley around the corner and take it from there." The sparkle in her eyes led Samantha to believe that the rest of the Sea World experience was already planned out.

"Okay." Sam turned to the rest of the entourage. "Let's go kids, follow the leader." Hugging close to Alex she whispered, "You can tell me - where are we going?"

"Let me just say that you will definitely be pleased." The tall woman put a loving arm around the smaller woman's shoulder.

Alex walked to the entrance of an area entitled "Dine with Shamu" and motioned for the group to follow her. Hums and ahs could be heard coming from mouths as gourmet odors titillated nostrils. The park hostess escorted them over to a table already occupied by Kelley and Aurora.

"So," Aurora began, "how did everyone enjoy the whale show."

She received all the accolades on the performance as well as the smiling objections that she, Kelley and Alex got away without getting soaked.

"You all looked so hot and uncomfortable, we thought for sure you'd find the cool water refreshing." Sapphire eyes matching those of her daughter twinkled with mirth as she looked from face to face and received a smile from each of her weekend houseguests. It was more than obvious that the day had been a tremendous success and a poolside buffet dinner with the star of Sea World - what better way was there to end the perfect day?

During the course of the feast, trainers joined the table to answer any questions the group might have formulated throughout the day. True to the fact that they were dining with Shamu, the leviathan made an appearance and even showed off by sliding into the area and allowing some of the patrons a closer look.

Totally sated by food, drink, and fun, it was soon time for them to climb back into the van and head toward La Jolla. No one realized how tiring the day had been until the vehicle pulled out of the parking lot and started back up the highway. Ray and Danny fell asleep, while Sonny, Suz and Sally talked amongst themselves of the wonders they encountered throughout the day.

"Don't be ridiculous," Samantha replied as Alex, her arm wrapped comfortably around her lover, began to apologize for there being no fireworks, laser or ice skating shows because of it being off-season.

"Don't you see how happy everyone is? This was a fantastic day, Alex."

"But you didn't get to see the manatee exhibit, the penguins and shark displays or the California Tide Pool."

"Well, why didn't you have them stay open a few more hours for us so I could have seen all those attractions?" The small blonde smiled up into somber eyes. "By the Gods you are serious."

"I wanted you to see it all."

"Alex the damn place is enormous! No one could see it all in one day - not and do it properly. I do believe we live not to very far from here, correct?"

"Correct."

"And your parents live what, a little over 15 minutes from here, right?"

"Right."

"Well then, don't you think it might be feasible that we might be able to come back down to this area sometime within the next few years and see the rest of the park?"

"Yes, Samantha, it's just . . ."

"Stop! Today was marvelous. Everyone enjoyed themselves immensely." She called over the seat to the passengers who were still awake.

"Did everyone have fun?"

A unanimous "Yes!" came from every seat that did not contain a sleeping person.

"See?" She turned to her lover, "Everyone had fun - I do believe that was the idea behind the entire day, was it not?"

"Most definitely. Nuff said, Samantha."

"The only thing I did not get to do today was have a heart-to-heart with my sister." She looked over at the younger Riley who had stopped discussing with Sonny and Suz to join Ray and Danny in the land of nod.

"I think something's bothering her and I don't think tonight is a good time to start a lengthy discussion." There was concern written all over Samantha's face.

"Listen, Honey, you're sister, Sonny and Ray are all staying until Monday morning. Suz and Danny are leaving tomorrow night after dinner. Marcy and Von are coming up for dinner tomorrow night. The best time might be to take a little walk by yourselves while we're at the zoo tomorrow."

"Sounds like a good idea." Resting her head on Alex's chest she felt her dark angel kiss her crown. "Thank you and your parents for a birthday weekend I will never forget."

"You're welcome, my Destiny, but the weekend isn't over yet." Anticipation of the days to come caused her stomach to churn, but she was determined to keep the trip to Sedona a secret until the morning of the actual birthday. *I love you so much, Samantha. Sedona is a special place and I can't wait to take you there.*

"Don't worry about Sally, Honey. Wait until you talk to her; I'm sure she just misses seeing you. You know things have changed at home, but I'm sure the three of them are working things out."

"I hope so, Alex. I hate the feeling that my family is falling apart, and it's all my fault."

"Don't be ridiculous. If there is anyone to blame in your family it's that . . ."

"Alex don't. Please. Not tonight. It's been too good a day to ruin."

"I'm sorry, Samantha . . . look we're home."

It was only eight o'clock but 'dragging butt' would have been the ideal term to describe the condition of the little group that exited the van and entered Cielo en Tierra.

Kelley offered a nightcap at the pool if anyone wanted to take a swim before retiring. The suggestion was met with undisputed approval from all and they dispensed to change into bathing suits.

Samantha and Alex walked Sally as far as her room, then continued on to their own, walking hand in hand down the long corridor leading to their suite.

As Samantha began to undress Alex noticed a slight red tint to her lover's shoulders.

"You got a lot of sun today," she commented, reaching for the aloe vera lotion.

"Lucky me. Look at you - all you do is turn golden! Talk about jealous."

"Here, take off that blouse and let me put a little of this on so you don't peel so badly or sting tonight." Opening the tube she lavished the cooling cream on the burning shoulders.

"Yeah, and I'll have a bunch more freckles in the morning, mark my words. Sally put some sun guard on me this morning, and I put some on her so at least we didn't get burnt to a crisp." Samantha shook her head in counterfeit disgust.

"Have I ever told you that a face without freckles is like a night sans the stars?"

"I don't believe you have, but . . . that's so . . . so bardic Alex." The smaller woman placed her hands high on broad shoulders and gently pushed down, forcing her lover to sit on the bed. She stepped between the long, muscular legs and dangled her arms over similarly powerful shoulders. Because of the height of the bed, emerald eyes stared directly into those of blue velvet. With the mechanics of a slow motion movie, the golden-haired beauty bent forward toward her lover, her lips parting slightly as she made her way to her final destination. The words 'I love you' softly breathed themselves into the atmosphere.

Unable to contain herself, Alex put her arms about the svelte waist before her and brought her destiny closer. "Come here you. You want me to wait all night?"

"Wait for what?" came the teasing reply.

"For this." The torch had been lit and there was no turning back, her mouth closed on Samantha's and she smiled inwardly when she heard the groan from deep within her lover's throat. Agile hands moved swiftly from the waist to manipulate and dispose of the unwanted bra her lover was wearing.

Filled with desire she had no intention of trying to subdue, she maneuvered the smaller woman until she was lying on the bed next to her.

"I am going to devour you this very minute." Within the blink of an eye shoes were disposed of as well as shorts and panties. The fair-haired woman lay naked on the bed, her dark angel standing regally above her drinking in her splendor.

"Alex, take off your clothes, I want to feel your skin next to mine."

"Your wish is my command." Speed was of the essence as they had guests who would have no problem at all teasing a tardy couple when they arrived at the pool.

Changing her approach, she pulled the smaller woman to the edge of the bed, kneeling down as she did so. Draping Samantha's legs, one over each shoulder, she lessened the distance between her mouth and her desire.

A wet kiss to the inside of each thigh, brought love bumps to the soft skin and she again smiled deeply, knowing that her touch was powerful.

"I'm going to feast on you, Samantha." Placing one finger on either side of Samantha's nether lips, she parted the folds and teased the sensitive area with the tip of her tongue. Hot breath mingled with juices that were already freely flowing, and moans could be heard from the top of the bed.

Glancing up she watched Samantha reach for and place the corner of a pillow in her mouth. The raven-haired beauty stretched, taking the muffler from her lover.

"No! Hearing your ecstasy is part of the magic."

"But Alex . . ."

"Been there Done that, Samantha. Thought we settled it last night. I want to hear your desire; I want to drown in the sound of your passion. When I lick you, draw you into my mouth, fill you with my tongue, your reaction intensifies my pleasure." Her hands left the pillow to travel down her lover's face, receiving kisses as she touched Samantha's mouth. Long, slender fingers trailed over rigidly upright nipples, while her mouth entertained itself in the playground beneath the golden mound.

Oblivious to anything that was not Samantha, Alex consumed with gay abandon the voluptuous feast before her. Open mouthed she covered Samantha's area of pleasure and allowed her tongue full reign of the treasure within. Slowly entering and exiting the soft, moist cave with her tongue, a moan begged to be set free but remained trapped deep within her throat as the one she loved surrendered herself to the ecstasy of the moment.

To her lover's satisfaction Samantha could not keep still; she writhed and moved in a rhythmic motion with the ebb and flow of Alex's tongue urging her lover on with the movement of her hips.

"Alex, faster. By the Gods Alex . . . take me . . . oh . . . yes . . . there . . . oh . . . Alex . . . Oh . . . Alex."

The scent of Samantha, her taste, her feel, Alex couldn't get enough, and what was truer was that she didn't want to get enough. She wanted to feast at the banquet before her until the first rays of the morning sun crept through the windows.

Over and over again her tongue found its target as the smaller woman on the bed encouraged her with actions and voice.

She had not intended to enter Samantha after the orgasm but could not or would not contain her passion when the blonde reached her first climax. Alex stood smiling down at the face she loved and the body she could not keep her hands away from. Carefully placing two, then three adept fingers within her lover's moist cavity, she straddled Samantha's leg, her own center aching for contact with the thigh below her. With an almost panicked expression, her eyes opened wide, surprised blue met heated green eyes as she felt Samantha's hand replace the thigh between her legs. Small fingers searched for the opening between her folds and upon finding it, pushed on the tiny erection that was crying out for attention.

Alex scooted herself higher, allowing her lover to reach deep within her passion as Samantha's fingers entered her and they swayed in unison to a music only the two of them could hear.

"I love you Samantha. Come with me." The dance of love continued as the two matched each other's tempo.

"By the Goddess Samantha!" Alex felt the smaller woman begin to spasm, as soft muscles tightened and released around her fingers.

"All . . . I . . . want . . ." Samantha's words etched themselves into the air, slowly and methodically, "Is . . . You!"

Alex's counter-reactions continued at a similar pace and intensity. Their combined breathing became labored, their bodies held together by passion, until the final thrust when Samantha exploded beneath her at the apex of her own rapture. The two lay limp, entangled in each other's arms, unable to contain all the love that poured forth from their union.

"Ooooh . . . Alex . . ." the words were whispered in the wake of their actions. "You make me feel so . . . beautiful. . ." Hot, joyous tears streamed down the sunburned face of the younger woman.

"I had nothing to do with your beauty, my Destiny. You can thank your Gods for that, as I do every day. All I did was fall in love with the face of an angel, only to find my soulmate hiding there waiting for me."

After what seemed like an eternity but in reality was only minutes, Alex whispered softly into Samantha's ear. "I could go out and tell everyone you were fatigued from too much fun and sun, and fell asleep."

"No Alex." The response came as a low whimper. "We can't do that . . . they all came to be with us this weekend the least we can do is be good hostesses."

"Mom's a good hostess." Alex countered.

"No these are our guests, not your mother's, as much as I would like to leave them in her expert hands tonight. The plus side is that I have a feeling no one is going to be up for very much longer; we all had quite an exhausting day."

"Fine, it's your call." Alex untangled from her lover, rolled over and off the bed. "Just remember," a long pointing finger wagged in the direction of Samantha, "they Will tease when we arrive; I can absolutely guarantee that!"

"We'll simply have to weather the consequences," the smaller woman sighed as she, followed her lover's example, rolling over and out of the soft sanctuary.

Quickly donning swimsuits they left their private haven and made for the festivities on the other side of the villa.

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"Well, well . . . look who finally decided to show up and grace us with their presence." Sonny turned, eyebrows raised as he spotted the tardy duo coming through the archway.

Sally was over talking to Suzanne and Kelley, Ray and Danny were in the midst of a heated discussion involving the escalating property taxes in California. Sonny had been refreshing his drink and strolled over to his friends as they entered the patio.

"Where's Mom?" Alex asked as she scanned the area.

"Oh, she said her Muse was whispering in her ear and she had to go pound on the computer for a bit." Sonny informed her.

"Sounds like Mom." Alex grinned.

"Wish my Muse would shout at me." Samantha added to the conversation. "If she's whispering, the volume is too low to break through."

"Give it time, Sammie. Aurora didn't become a success overnight, you know. It just seems that way when you see all she has accomplished." The gentle man put an arm around his friend's shoulder.

"I don't think I really give my writing the time it deserves." The small blonde confessed. "What with work and all the new stuff I'm learning," she glanced up at her lover, "and my new social life . . ."

"Hey . . . don't go blaming your lack of imagination or absence of the Muse on me. Huh uh - won't take that rap. I heard it my entire childhood." Creating a mock whining tone she continued, "*Oh Kelley, you never give me enough time to write. Every time I sit down at the typewriter, you*

*find something else for me to do.'* Don't even go there Samantha Renee. If you want more time for writing, take it. Work half days if you must but don't blame me when your Muse ignores you."

"Half days? Like I could afford to work only half days! And my Muse is not ignoring me, she's just a little slow sometimes at formulating what I need to address."

A knowing glance was exchanged between Sonny and Alex as Samantha shook her head totally missing the smile on her lover's face.

"Hey, we'll talk about it when we get back home, okay. I'm gonna get us something to drink."

Sonny stepped closer to his friend. "You know, Sweetcakes, Alex is right about spending less time at the Center. I'm sure she's hired plenty of staff to take some of the load off your shoulders and if she hasn't already, she would."

"Sonny, I don't want her to feel that she has to support me - monetarily that is."

"Sammie, Alex started that Center because she's a damn workaholic, not because she needed the money. She's just like Kelley in that respect. I have noticed that since she's hooked up with you, she's begun to relax a lot more, and I know she intends to eventually spend a lot of time away from Alternative Paradise once all is running smoothly. But believe me, Sweetness, you don't have to worry about being a burden or not carrying your weight in the finance department, Alex is a money magnet!"

Samantha didn't get a chance to address the statements her friend had just confided as Sally, Suz, and Alex all commenced joining the two of them.

With a grin that spread across her entire face Sally approached her sister. "Sammie, what took you and Alex so long getting here?"

"Do you really want an answer to that one, Sally?" Suzanne chimed in, clinking her glass on Sonny's.

"Just look at the sweet blush on Sammie's face girls. I don't think any of us really needs an answer to that question, she's just answered it without speaking a word."

"Okay, okay - leave her alone you vultures." Alex interjected, handing Samantha a glass of wine. "Here, Honey, I'm going over and join the 'serious' discussion at the other end of the deck."

"Gods Alex, you're going to leave me alone with these . . . these . . . friends?"

"Yeah, that's what I had in mind." Alex smiled as she gave Sam a quick peck on the cheek.

"Don't be long, I thought we came out here to swim." She watched as the love of her life strolled gracefully over toward the opposite end of the patio.



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The next few hours seemed to fly by. Samantha got to visit a little with Suzanne while Sally and Sonny played catch by the pool and Suz caught her up on all the gossip in the transcribing business. Suzanne said she was doing Angel and Alex's dictation and gave Samantha a pat on the back for their training. She also explained that Danny needed to be back at work Monday morning, so the two of them would be leaving tomorrow night. Samantha said she understood completely about having to get back for work and was thrilled that they all got to come down and visit. In the back of her mind she made a note to take time out tomorrow to walk with Sally alone sometime so the two of them could talk.

By the time Samantha finished her wine, Alex was back by her side ready to take the promised swim. After a short game of water volleyball, those who were not exhausted after the Sea World tour, were now very much so and felt that if they didn't go rest soon they would never arise to tackle the zoo trip in the morning.

Kelley begged off early and went to join Aurora in their suite.

En masse the small troupe made their way back to the other end of the villa and to their prospective suites and rooms.

"Breakfast will be served at 9:00 a.m. sharp. Anyone getting up early can come help, anyone up later will go to the zoo hungry." Alex informed everyone as they said goodnight in the hallway.

"Better be up," Samantha added, "she's a stickler and I don't leave leftovers."

"We don't leave leftovers." Sonny corrected her with a hug and kiss goodnight. "See you in the morning Sweetness. Night Alex. Night all."

One by one the guests exchanged evening farewells until Alex sarcastically broke up the little ritual. "Damn, I feel like one of the Waltons - let's just have a group hug and a mass 'goodnight'; this conversation could go 'round in circles for hours and I for one am tired."

"Big baby," Samantha teased as they continued to walk toward their suite. Upon reaching their door, Sam turned and waved at those still left standing in the hall conversing.

Alex waited until Sam entered then closed the door behind them.

"Are you still glad I didn't go out and tell them all that you fell asleep?" Alex queried.

"Yes, I'm glad. It was a nice couple of hours, after I got through the teasing. You could have stayed around and weathered some of that with me, you know." Samantha pinched her lover on the arm.

"Ouch! I told you they'd do that. I didn't want to listen to Sonny gloat." Alex started to reciprocate with a pinch of her own but seeing the anticipated expression on Samantha's face, she reconsidered. "Okay . . . Jacuzzi or shower?"

"Jacuzzi sounds wonderful but I'm afraid I'll fall asleep in the water."

"I'm afraid I'll want a repeat of the incident just before we left for the pool." Alex grinned over at Sam.

"Nooooo, no repeat tonight. If today was any indication of tomorrow's activities, we're going to need some rest. I guess a Quick shower is what we need." Samantha walked toward the bathroom.

"Can we at least take it together?" Alex pleaded, smiling as she took on the whiny tone Samantha used when something wasn't going her way.

"Can you behave?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?"

"Not the ones in the zoo, as you will see tomorrow."

"Oh, all right, party pooper - shower and on my best behavior." The dark angel finally gave in as she followed the blonde into the bathing area.

Minutes later, a cleaner but still tired duo tumbled into bed.

"Are you enjoying your weekend, Samantha?"

"How could I not be?" The small blonde snuggled closer and looked up, appreciation beamed from her eyes as she stretched to give Alex a thank you kiss. "You're making it difficult for me to think of wishes when I spot the Evening Star. You're granting them all before I have a chance to make them."

"Then I guess you'll just have to start working overtime thinking up new ones. Maybe you should go beyond the scope of the small wish and go more towards the extravagant. They may take more time to grant." She held her love close, basking in the warmth of Samantha's skin. "What do you want for a real gift for your birthday?"

"Alex - you've got to be kidding me!" Samantha pushed up on her elbow so she could look her lover directly in the eyes. "This weekend . . . all the time and money you've put into having our friends and my sister come and spend it with us . . . this is all the birthday present I expect."

The dark-haired woman smiled up into serious green eyes. "Put the twinkle back into those emeralds, Irish. This weekend is Not your birthday; it's only leading up to it. Now, I'll ask you again - what do you want for a real gift?"

Samantha plopped back down on the bed, her head resting in the curve of her lover's arm, eyes staring directly up at the ceiling. "Let's see - what could I possibly want for my birthday?" She paused, placing her hand on her mouth, thinking. After a minute of silence she again resumed her elbow position. "I would like to fly to a lover's paradise, other than the one we already live in, and spend a week with just the two of us."

"That sounds like something I'd wish for."

"Honestly, Alex - I know we'll be spending the rest of the week here with your folks after everyone else leaves and I'm sure we'll be going lots of places. I really don't want anything other than that for my birthday. There is going to be no way in Hades that I can ever match this celebration when your birthday rolls around in February."

"Sure you can, anything you do will be . . ."

"No, Alex. I'll be able to throw you a party or something like that, but nothing compared to what you've already done. Do you know how much money you've spent this weekend already?"

"I believe so." She answered innocently, trying to get away from the serious expression on her lover's face. Alex pulled Samantha closer and gently whispered into her ear. "Don't worry about the money, my Destiny, it's Only money."

"But Alex, I don't have that kind of . . ."

"Do you need a raise, Samantha?"

"You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm being serious."

"Alex, do you realize that we're getting way off the subject?"

"Yes, but if you need more money so you can spend it on me . . . well then . . . you need a raise."

Finally the dark-haired beauty got the reaction she had been working for. Samantha started laughing. "What in Tartarus Am I going to do with you, Alexis Dorian?"

"You are going to love me Forever, Samantha Riley."

"You bet your sweet ass I am!" Samantha kissed her passionately, beginning to rekindle her own desires as well as those of her dark angel.

Breaking off the kiss she put her head back down on her lover's chest, her fingers tracing circles in the muscular flesh of Alex's exposed stomach. "I'll love you forever, Alex, you can count on that. You fire up the depths of my desire just by looking at me, but for now my darling, for this

very minute, we'd better get some rest or as I said before there will be no dealing with me in the morning."

Alex breathed deeply and squeezed her arms around the precious gift, who had come into her life to make her whole. "Sweet dreams, my Destiny."

"Sweet dreams, Alex."

Samantha once again looked out the glass doors, trying to compose a wish for the heavens. The only thing that kept coming to mind was that perhaps someday she would be a famous author like Aurora and then there wouldn't be all these petty discussions about money. She thought back to what Sonny had said about the Dorians having more money than they could ever imagine spending and tried to make herself comfortable with Alex spending so much of her money on this weekend.

*I guess if the tables were turned and I was the one with the money, I would be lavishing you with extravagant parties and luxuries.* When she thought about it in that respect, everything became a little more palatable. With the conflict settled in her mind, sleep was just a breath away.

The stars twinkled high above in their heavens as the small blonde sighed deeply, her frustrations released for the time being. Sensing that the woman who had captured her heart was already sound asleep she cuddled closer and kissed her gently on the chest. "I love you Alex," she whispered. "You're my hero in more ways than you could ever imagine."

Continued in Part 5.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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### ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The

names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## **Part 5**

### **Chapter 5**

Morning stars still shared the heavens with the moon and the recently awakened sun when Alex awoke. Stroking Samantha's silky blonde hair she kissed her sweetly. "Hey Almost Birthday Girl, you want to sleep a little longer or would you like to help me start breakfast for everyone."

"Breakfast," the small woman yawned, "Is it really that time already?"

"Sure is, but I can give you a little over an hour more to sleep if you want." Combing the fine hair with her fingers she then caressed the face beneath and kissed her lover gently.

"You know, Alex," Samantha rubbed the sleep from her eyes, "I think I'll get up with you and help this time. It'll be fun."

"You don't have to, my love; this is your vacation you know?"

"I know but I want to watch you and Kelley interact in the kitchen. It should be fun watching someone tell you what to do." A smile appeared on the sleepy face as she looked up into already sparkling blue eyes. "How can you look so beautiful before you even wash your face?"

"Beautiful . . . you're crazy! And . . . what do you mean watch someone Tell Me what to do?"

"You don't expect me to believe that Kelley would let You be in charge of the breakfast, now do you?"

"Well . . ."

"Come on Alex, we both know better. I'll bet you still act like a child when you're helping Kelley."

"I do not," came the indignant reply. "Perhaps it would be best if you just rolled over, grabbed a pillow and put your sarcastic little ass back to sleep." Doing her damndest to keep a straight face she untangled herself from the smaller woman's embrace and started to get out of bed.

"Oh no you don't, Alexis Dorian." Samantha grabbed at the taller woman's nightshirt, pulling her back to land squarely into waiting arms.

Turning around to face Samantha, Alex arched an eyebrow and gave a crooked smile, "Just what did you think you were going to accomplish with that little maneuver?"

"There was no 'think' to it . . . I got you back into bed with me." Throwing her arms around the tall woman she pulled her close and whispered into her ear. "I feel like a cat that is constantly in heat when I'm around you. All I want to do is touch and be touched."

"Just call me 'Alley' because I feel exactly the same way."

Warm caresses being given and received made for a fabulous greeting to the shining new day.

Alex trailed baby kisses down Samantha's neck while her hands roamed the contours of the smaller woman's body. Nipples excited by the morning caresses stood at attention as Alex's mouth found its destination.

"Alex, don't . . . I won't want you to stop if I let you start." Samantha pleaded.

"Who says I have to stop until we're finished?"

"You know very well that you have to get into the kitchen to help Kelley. You can't be staying in here playing around with me."

"Oh but this is not playing; I'm very serious about what I am doing here."

"Then really get serious . . . Alex we can fool around all we want after everyone has left but you promised breakfast by 9 o'clock this morning and at the rate you're going we won't be out of this suite until noon." She pulled away from the raven-haired beauty, doing her best to look intimidating. "Alex don't make me be the meanie. It's not fair."

"Oh, okay. I guess you're right. So, you coming with?" Alex asked as she started toward the bathroom.

"Sure, why not." Samantha agreed, following closely behind.

In the shower Samantha asked more questions than a five-year-old, such as how far it was to the zoo, would it take all day, what kind of exotic animals could they expect to see, and where they were going for dinner.

"All the exciting exhibits you're going to be exposed to today and you want to know where we're having dinner?" Alex laughed at her soapy lover as she began to spray her off.

"It was just a conversational question, Alex. I don't have to know but you said Marcy and Von were coming up and I was wondering if they were going to meet us at the zoo or . . ."

"Actually I think I'll keep the dinner reservations a surprise."

"No . . . tell me . . . please," Samantha begged as she began soaping Alex up.

"Half the fun of this weekend is you Not knowing everything that's going on until it happens. You want to ruin all my fun?" Alex pretended to pout.

Seeing through the façade, Samantha decided to play along anyway. "Of course I wouldn't want to spoil your good time, poor baby." She drew the just rinsed woman into an embrace. "I'll wait and be surprised if that's the way you want it. Come on, we need to get dressed before Kelley has everything done."

"No way . . . she will definitely wait until I arrive. Can't start breakfast without a gofer, and that is most decidedly me when Kelley's cooking; just call me Ms Gofer."

Samantha giggled at the thought of Alex being bossed around by anyone and she quite assuredly wanted to see the interaction between mother and daughter.

"So what are we wearing today?" Samantha asked, finishing up blow drying her hair and turning the machine on her lover who quickly grabbed it out of her hands.

"You're dangerous early in the morning. Do you realize that?"

"I asked what we're wearing?"

"I don't know about you but I'm all for cargo shorts and a tee shirt. It's hot and sticky out there, and we have a day full of riding in open buses and walking. I, for one, intend to be comfortable."

"Comfortable it is then, shorts and a midriff - that okay with you?"

"Most definitely. I'll get to watch all the gals and guys watching you and know that I'm the only one who gets to touch!" A smile and a wink made their way over to where the petite blonde was primping.

"All righty then, are we set to go?"

"As set as I'll ever be." Samantha answered.

The corridor was quiet when they stepped out into it. Early morning sunlight streaked through the skylights, casting a faint pink glow onto the walls, giving an almost otherworldly effect.

Alex gave a short tap on the door of Ray and Sonny's room as well as Danny and Sue's when they passed by. She knew that at least one half of each of the couples was an early riser and figured she'd give them a chance, if they were already awake to know that others were up as well.

"Should I let Sally sleep until it's closer to time?" Samantha asked as they passed the younger woman's door.

"No harm in letting her get a little more shut eye. You two going to have a heart-to-heart today?"

"Yeah, something's bothering her. I think she wants to tell me but is afraid. I get a knot in my stomach when I think about what it could be." Samantha looked up into concerned blue eyes as Alex drew her close with an arm around her shoulder.

"It'll be fine; I'm sure of it, Honey. Things are bound to be a little rough with the way your father took the news. Even if he were able to deal with your sexuality . . . he hates my guts." An uncommon look of sadness fleetingly appeared in the tall woman's eyes. "A few months ago I would have been thrilled to have caused Don Riley some honest to Goddess grief. It would have made my day. I know that's not the kind of confession you want to hear, but your dad has been a thorn in my side for years, Samantha."

Alex could feel the sag of Samantha's shoulders when she finished the sentence.

"Damn! I hate to make you unhappy when the day started off so good. I was trying to tell you that I'm sorry now . . . where I wouldn't have been before, but I guess I didn't say it right."

"It's okay, Alex. Really, I understand."

"No Honey, I don't think you do. Your dad and I have been rivals of the worst kind. I would have done anything to make his life miserable and that's probably exactly what's been going through his mind these past months - that I finally got him where it really hurt - in his family. But instead of making me feel good, I feel miserable."

She stopped walking, motioned Samantha into the formal living room and motioned for her to sit on the couch.

"Damn Samantha! This is not what I wanted." Getting down on her knees and looking up into the delicate face she adored, she slowly wiped a tear away as it dampened her lover's face. "I keep digging the hole bigger, don't I?"

"No Alex, it's just . . ."

"What I'm trying to say is that even though your dad deserves every ounce of agony he receives, you and the rest of your family are innocents; innocents I didn't even know existed until the day I met and fell in love with you. And I'm sorry the three of you are hurting over this."

Samantha batted back tears that refused not to fall and took Alex's face between her small hands. Looking deep into her lover's soul she spoke, using hushed tones. "My father is a bastard Alex . . . there . . . I've said it. It's not like I haven't known for years but I never had anything or anyone mean enough to me to face him down before. Truthfully, he would have reacted the exact same way no matter who you turned out to be, in actuality I think I'm even a little glad there was the



double whammy, except for the fact that my mother is probably bearing the brunt of this entire situation. I deeply regret that."

The small blonde leaned over and kissed Alex softly on the lips, leaving an aftertaste of salt in her lover's mouth.

"Hmmm," Alex commented as she rose to stand in front of Samantha. "Nice touch - salt." She continued, reaching out her arms to help Sam off the couch and into her arms for an embrace.

"Whatd'ya say we put this topic aside for a little while and get back to the problem at hand."

"Problem?"

"What exactly to make for breakfast." Alex released her hold on the smaller woman, still keeping an arm around the shapely shoulders.

"Most definitely pancakes . . . other than that . . . the decision is all yours and Kelley's."

They almost reached the kitchen when another early riser joined them. Ray caught up with them and explained that he felt Sonny would probably sleep until awoken.

"That's fine, we don't need too many Indians in the kitchen anyway, it makes Kelley nervous."

Nearing the kitchen the odor of coffee far outweighed the scent of the pot of tea Alex and Samantha knew would be waiting for them when they arrived. Kelley was most assuredly up and had been for a little while.

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By the time 8:30 rolled around the two main chefs and their many excellent assistants managed to set the table, and have most of the meal prepared. Samantha was chosen to play camp counselor and go wake all who had yet to make an appearance, which included basically the same four sleepyheads - Aurora, Suz, Sally, and Sonny. It was beginning to seem as if everyone whose first name started with an "S" found bed much more appealing than watching the sunrise. Samantha would have been among the sleepers if it hadn't been for the adrenaline rush she was receiving from the entire weekend.

Cooperation was also a necessity after breakfast and with everyone pitching in, the dishes were in the dishwasher, and the entire group was dressed and ready to walk out the door a little before 10 o'clock.

"You know, Kelley, the zoo opened an hour ago?" Aurora off-handedly mentioned as the van was being boarded.

"I thought we would be the first people there this morning," Samantha stated, glancing up at Alex.

Alex looked up at her mother who just gave everyone too much information and glared.

"No, listen." Aurora began, giving an explanation as to why the later hour. "We figured two things were apparent with this little troupe. First, that almost six hours was more than enough time to spend walking around looking at animals after yesterday's trek, and secondly that there was no way in hell we were going to get all of you up and out of the house by 8:30 in the morning."

"I, for one, am glad you didn't wake me up at the crack of dawn to go look at varmints," Sonny issued forth from the back seat as he settled in.

"Ditto, here," Sally and Suz chimed in.

"I could go a lifetime without animal watching," Danny whispered to his partner under his breath.

"I heard that," Samantha smiled as she tapped her friend on the shoulder. "Guess the consensus is that you did right by letting the sleepyheads get their beauty rest, Aurora."

"Listen to you, as if you normally get up before the sun is fully set in the morning sky!" Sally looked over at her sister. "What did get you up so early?"

"I'm becoming an early bird," Samantha teased.

"Yeah, right and I'm one of the richest women in the world." Suzanne chimed in.

"Can't have that title, it's already taken, right Alex?" Sonny looked back at his friend smiling but received a cold stare from ice blue eyes, telling him that, once again, he opened his mouth and inserted his foot. "Just kidding - get a grip, Alex - it's early." He turned back around and began some insignificant banter with Danny to take the attention off his faux pas.

Seeing the expression on his face but not that on Alex's, Samantha tugged on her lover's shirt and whispered, "What was that all about? Sonny looks like he just lost his best friend."

"His sense of humor is a little off this early in the a.m. Not everyone appreciates it," Alex answered, smiling slightly to relieve the tension.

"We should be there shortly. There's the San Diego skyline and you can see the Coronado Bridge from here if you look over there." Alex pointed out the window, quickly changing the subject.

"We'll have to go visit the Hotel del Coronado sometime."

"That sound interesting, maybe we can go next week." Samantha agreed.

"We'll see," Alex answered as she pointed back out the window.

The 22-minute ride seemed short, due in part to Aurora's mini-guide as they passed different sections of the ocean-side city. The huge Zoo sign dwarfed the little group as they stood in front of the larger than life illustrations of a panda, elephant, polar bear, and giraffe.

Aurora gathered the remaining members of the troupe around her. "Okay, while Kelley and Alex are getting the tickets let me tell you what we have planned for today."

"Planned activities via the Camp Counselor," Sonny kidded.

The next thing he knew, the 'counselor' had him by the ear, pulling him into the center of the group.

"Kidding . . . Aurora . . . I was kidding!" he cried in mock fear, smiling all the while.

"Don't you think I know that?" she chortled back at him, having no intention of loosening her hold on the tender ear. "But I do so enjoy remembering what it was like to be a mother and to have this power." Giving one last yank at the now pink ear, she released her victim and turned her attention back to the outline of events for the day.

"Because this place is so spread out we figured the best thing to do would be take the Skyfari Aerial Tram first and let everyone get a good look at the layout. After that we're getting tickets for the Kangaroo Bus tour where we can hop on and get off at all the different stations. Doing that we can walk around until we are finished with each area and then continue on. We are also getting tickets for a special VIP tour of behind-the-scenes, but I'm not sure what time Kelley has that scheduled. I think it's for after lunch and will take a couple hours. Okay," she looked over and saw Kelley and Alex motioning that they were ready to go in, "any questions . . . voice them as we're walking, looks like this show's on the go."

The air tram ride fulfilled its purpose exactly and when they were all back down on the ground, the discussion focused on where to start and what everyone as individuals wanted to see during the day. They all agreed to bypass the polar bears after having seen a similar exhibit the day before at Sea World. First on everyone's list was the panda habitat. The five-week old baby panda had made headlines and Hua Mei was top priority to be seen. Of course they hadn't realized that being such a newcomer the viewing was going to be via a camcorder - nevertheless it was an exciting exhibit. At least Shi Shi was out and about in his viewing area, giving the visitors an up-close encounter with a giant panda.

There was a toss-up about whether to visit the chimps or the gorillas. Luckily the group consisted of one extra person when it came to voting, because the chimps barely won out by a vote of 5-4. It seemed most of the females, and Sonny wanted to see the playful chimps as opposed to the more somber gorillas and there wasn't going to be enough time to visit both.

As they were getting off the bus, Alex eyed with curiosity a trio of what looked liked cowboys. Since San Diego tended to be more of a relaxed, surfer, Navy kind of town, obvious out-of-towners were easily spotted. The young men, who caught Alex's attention were definitely not from this area of the country, maybe it was the tight jeans, snakeskin boots, and cowboy hats that

gave them away. The tall beauty would have thought nothing of the out-of-place travelers if it hadn't been for the sneering looks and quick whispers she caught out of the corner of her eye as her group was disembarking from the bus.

She nudged Kelley with her elbow and nodded her head in the direction of the 'cowboys' who decided to exit the bus as well. "What do you think of them?" she whispered in her mother's ear.

"Cowboys?"

"Yeah, but I think they might be trouble, keep them in plain sight," The younger woman warned.

"What are you two whispering about," Samantha wanted to know.

"We were complaining we didn't get to go play with the gorillas," Alex quickly lied, grinning down at the small blonde.

"Don't be a poor loser, Alex. We can always come back some other time and catch the exhibits we don't have time for today." She placed herself between Alex and Sally, locking arms with the two women she adored, as the trio continued walking toward the chimps.

There was only so much entertainment the chimps could provide. The jungle atmosphere was beautiful which included everything from lush tropical plants to a raging waterfall. But, as cute as the chimps were, the group soon lost interest and began heading back toward the bus station.

Kelley informed everyone that there was approximately forty-five minutes for the next area, then lunch, followed by the tour. A decision needed to be made as to which animals they wanted to see. The only two who seemed to have any favorites were Sonny and Sam. Sonny wanted to travel over to the area that held the big cats . . . the leopards, jaguar, and tigers. Sam wanted to check in on Onya-Birri ("ghost boy" in the language of the Aborigine's), the albino koala that just celebrated his second birthday.

Because it was Samantha's weekend the decision was easy - they stayed on the bus until the Koala exhibit was announced. While they were en route to the site, Samantha read out loud from the information they received at the gate so everyone would know more about the little guy. Once they started watching the koalas' climb and eat, it was obvious the choice had been a good one. Sam was talking to Sally about the habitat of the koalas when Alex tapped her on the shoulder.

"I'm going with Kelley over to the rest rooms. We'll be right back." She looked around a few times then gave Samantha a squeeze on the arm. "Don't talk to strangers."

"Okay . . . I won't talk to anyone stranger than Sonny," Samantha joked. When she noticed that a smile did not appear on Alex's face, the blonde became a little concerned. "You serious, Alex?"

"Just a little," Alex admitted.

"What's up?"

"Nothing really, it's just a feeling." Placing a hand on Samantha's shoulder she leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. "It's really nothing, I'm just over protective of my almost birthday girl."

"Okay," Samantha smiled as she watched the mother and daughter begin to walk away, "So, we won't talk to strangers." She called after them.

Turning back to Sonny and Sally, Samantha pointed high up into the treetops. "Look at them go to town on those leaves. This paper says they get fresh branches from several different kinds of eucalyptus trees on a daily basis. It also mentions that each variety has a different taste - I wonder who did the taste testing," she laughed.

Suz and Aurora were sitting on one of the observation benches talking, and Ray and Danny veered off to the exhibit adjacent to the small marsupials. Sally, Samantha, and Sonny were left alone, to stand captivated in front of the entertaining little animals, as they continued to watch them eat and climb among the high trees.

A deep base voice interrupted the conversation of the three friends. "Y'all like watchin' them furry little bears, Sissy Boy?"

Sonny spun around to find himself looking slightly up and into the face of a very unfriendly looking young man wearing a cowboy hat cocked back off his furrowed brow.

"Excuse me?" Sonny couldn't believe he was being accosted in the middle of the zoo.

"Y'all heard me, Sissy Boy. And there ain't no excuse for you and your kind."

By now there was an interloper flanking each of the three friends. Sally looked up at the figure behind her and then over toward the occupied bench situated about 20 feet away. Her eyes met Aurora's eye and the older woman grabbed Suzanne's hand, pulling her up from the bench as they started back toward their friends. En route, Suzanne yelled for Danny, who was by now nowhere in sight.

"Why don't you go play somewhere else with you little friends?" Samantha asked, looking at each one of the villains individually.

"Hey, little lady, if I was you I'd mind my own business." The ruffian addressed Samantha.

"This is my business -- this is my friend. We're not bothering you . . ."

"He is!" A strong, rough looking finger pointed in the direction of Sonny, almost touching him on the face. "Me and my buddies here were having ourselves a good time until we saw him. He makes my stomach turn."

"Well, if you were to look the other direction you wouldn't see him, now why don't you go away and leave us alone?" Samantha encouraged.

"What's the problem here?" Aurora asked when she reached the scene.

"Nothing for you to be concerned with, ma'am. It's just that we don't think he ought to be swishing around this here public establishment like he owned the place." The spokesman for the outsiders turned back to Sonny giving him a slight push. "You know what we do with your kind where I come from, Fagot?"

"I don't believe I'd like to find out," Sonny countered, trying to make light of the situation but trembling inside. Physical confrontation was definitely not one of his strong points.

"Well, it's quite obvious you aren't from around Here!" A strong contralto voice boomed as Alex stepped closer to the seat of trouble.

The agitator took his attention from Sonny long enough to spin around, his eyes meeting glacial blue ones, narrowed firmly upon his face.

"Is that look supposed to scare me?" He thundered at Alex.

"It would if you had any sense between those two large ears of yours," Sonny exclaimed, happy to be out of harm's way.

The young man glanced over his shoulder at Sonny then back at Alex, eyeing her up and down with the glare of a predator. "You're a big girl, now ain't ya?"

Deliberately stepping almost close enough to kiss him, she answered very slowly. "Yes, and very capable. Trust me, you don't want to anger me, cowboy."

"Ha! Listen girly . . ."

Two strong hands reached out and grabbed the checkered shirt of the 'cowboy', almost ripping it out from the tight jeans. Staying in his face, now nose to nose Alex retorted, "I'm gonna play nice and give you one chance to join up with your little friends and 'mosey' on down the road."

Kelley came out of the bathroom and was racing toward the explosive scene, and Aurora was beginning to get upset. Out of the corner of her eye Alex saw Ray and Danny as they intersected the stranger's friends on their way to help their companion, and sent them running in the opposite direction.

With her guard seeming let down, the young man standing in front of her thought he would at least be able to get in a shot at Sonny before taking off running. Alex loosened her grip on his shirt and he figured if he swung around quick enough he could at least land one pop in the face of the queen standing behind him.

Ripping out of Alex's hold, he spun around and drew back his arm to let one fly in the direction of the now frightened Sonny, who instantly put his hands up to his face and screamed. But the arm never got any further than the pull back when the cowboy felt a powerful vise-like grip bearing down on his elbow and another hand grabbing him around the waist, spinning him back around to face an extremely agitated Alex.

"Listen Dick-head, I gave you the only chance you're going to get." She hissed.

Aurora screamed out, "Don't hurt him Alex."

Samantha chimed in with an opposite; "You go girl."

A small crowd on the outskirts of the commotion watched in awe as the agile, raven-haired beauty picked the man up, who looked to be her equal in stature and even more so in muscle, and literally threw him into the fence separating the humans from the koalas.

"You want to act like an animal, ass hole, I can give you an up close and personal visit inside the cage." Keeping his back to the chained link and lifting him a foot off the ground, she threatened to deposit him on the other side of the fence when a strong hand gently tapped her shoulder.

"Temper, temper Alex," Kelley's voice rang through the angry thoughts filling her daughter's head.

"It could have been any of them he picked on, Kelley." Her tone turned almost to a plea. "What if he'd gone after Samantha - I would have had to kill him."

"But he didn't so put him down before the zoo attendants arrive and you find yourself the one in trouble."

With a final show of strength she lifted him a little higher and let him drop to the cement, placing a foot on his back as he landed. "You are indeed one lucky cowboy. If it were up to me, you'd be finding out just how wild those little leaf eating marsupials behind that fence can be. Now get your bigoted ass out of my sight before I change my mind."

Brushing himself off he looked around for the hat he lost when he went flying toward the fence. "Yeah, well you just caught me off guard." He could barely get the words out for the tension in his neck.

Samantha picked up the oversized cowboy hat from the ground and held it out to him, green daggers flying from her eyes. As he passed by, he grabbed it out of her hand without looking her in the face.

He glanced over his shoulder at Alex. "I thought there was something weird about you. You're a Fucking dyke," Samantha heard him mutter as he put his hat back on his head, his face beet red.

"What did you say?" The small blonde asked.

He turned and looked at her, saw that she was rapidly approaching his nemesis, and turned back around beginning to run in the direction his friends took minutes before.

"Well now that the excitement of the day is clearly over . . ." Aurora began, ". . . is anyone hungry?"

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The remainder of the day at the zoo went smoothly. Lunch was served at the Treehouse Café and there was just enough time to shop at little at the Treehouse Trader before being given their behind-the-scenes tour.

The tour took almost 2½ hours, but it was a sit down affair, so even in the heat of the afternoon it was most enjoyable. Starting out the guide explained the layout of the park and why each group of animals was housed where they were. Occasionally, they all filed out of the small bus to get a peek at behind the scenes where the animals were feed, sick ones cared for, and a glimpse of how the new arrivals were introduced to living at the world famous zoo.

Sonny was especially pleased that the tour included a look at the big cats that he had given up seeing to satisfy Samantha's curiosity about the koalas. Danny finally spoke up and showed an interest in some of the smaller desert animals.

They skipped the aviaries and Arctic animals. The guide was extremely informative as she told them about some of the after hours specials the Wild Animal Park ran occasionally. Sally showed a growing interest in the less civilized park where the animals were exposed to greater freedoms, and she untiringly asked questions as the tour continued. Samantha nudged Alex and whispered to her about having Sally visit more often so she could experience all the attractions in the Southern California area.

Alex, of course, agreed that it was a marvelous idea.

Not being much of an animal person, and sort of along for the ride, Suz talked to whomever did not seem totally interested in the subject the guide was covering at any particular point in time. On the whole, though, everyone enjoyed the day immensely and when the guide announced the end of the tour an audible groan was expelled from the lips of every participant.

The park was already closed to the public by the time the bus pulled back into the station from where it originated. Kelley asked the driver if it would be too much trouble for her to drop them off at the van. With the same hospitality that prevailed throughout the entire tour, the guide stated, "No problem", which was actually a very lucrative answer, as Kelley slipped her a \$50 bill for taking such good care of the little group.

Mini conversations abounded on the way back to the Villa as the friends compared who liked what best, and shared the contents of their souvenir bags with each other.



It was close to 5:30 by the time the van and its occupants arrived back at the Villa. Alex spotted Marcy's car in the drive as they were pulling up and pointed it out to Samantha.

"Mom left the place open for them; she figured they'd beat us here." Alex explained.

"That's great. This is going to be a wonderful dinner tonight." Samantha grinned, putting her arm around Alex's waist. "So, Suz and Danny are leaving sometime tonight, right?"

"Right."

"And Marcy and Von, are they staying until tomorrow?" Samantha wanted to know.

"Probably not. I think Marcy has to work early. But they don't live that far from here, maybe 30-45 minutes tops."

"Alex, I didn't get to talk to Sally alone today. I need to spend a little time with her. When do you think I should do that?"

"Probably right after we get into the house, Honey. Say hello to Marcy and Von then excuse yourself and take Sally for a walk down on the beach."

"Down on the beach. How in Tartarus do we get to the beach from the house?"

"It's easy; I'll show you." Putting an arm around the small figure, they walked into the Villa to greet their new guests.

Draped over a chair in the family room, drink in hand, Alex spotted her old friend with Von standing next to her looking out admiring the vista. Greetings were exchanged all around and Kelley set up the bar to accommodate the rest of the small party.

"Samantha," Aurora addressed the younger woman. "Alex and I discussed going out to dinner tonight and decided it might be more intimate if we just ordered a little something in and stayed here to celebrate your birthday. Would that be okay with you?"

"That would be wonderful with me." Giving the older woman a hug she continued, "I want to thank you again for opening your house for my birthday."

"Think nothing of it, Samantha, we're having a great time. It's been quite a while since the place has been filled with Alex's friends and on such a special occasion. I also want to tell you that I think your sister is adorable."

"I'm kind of fond of her myself," the younger woman smiled. "But, to tell you the truth I need to get a few minutes alone with Sally before she has to leave tomorrow. You wouldn't mind if we disappeared for a little while would you?"

"Not at all Samantha. Why don't you take Sally down on the beach, it's a beautiful walk and she kept telling me how much she loves the ocean."

"That's what Alex suggested, too. I think I will. Thanks, Aurora."

"You're more than welcome, Honey."

As she walked back toward Marcy, Von, and Alex, Samantha spoke shortly to Suz, telling her how nice it was they came down for the weekend and how Suz ought to come to some of the classes or lectures at the Center. Samantha knew she would never get the redhead to any class that involved physical activity, but she might talk her into one of the lectures, occasionally. In actuality it really didn't matter if she ever came to the Center, there were other interests the two still had in common. Sonny walked over to them while they were talking, leaving Samantha an out to go excuse herself and greet the new arrivals.

A few minutes of chit-chat and Samantha explained that her sister was going back up to Washington tomorrow morning so Marcy suggested that the two of them go somewhere quite to talk. Sam thanked the friends for not considering her rude and received a huge belly laugh from Alex's old friend.

"Samantha, we don't stand on ceremony here. We'll still be here when the two of you get through, the night is young." She lifted her glass and toasted to the room. "May the Villa survive the evening."

"You know damn right well the Villa will survive the evening," Alex chimed in, laughing. "It survived us going through high school." Patting her friend on the shoulder she excused herself and Samantha.

As they looked around the room the two lovers beamed. They'd only been together a short time and here they were celebrating Samantha's birthday with good friends, people who started out being acquainted with one or the other of the partners, but now considered themselves friend or family to both.

Samantha spotted Sally standing over by the pool table, talking to Danny. She went to retrieve her sister while Alex started toward the pool area. The small blonde walked over and politely interrupted her sister's conversation. "Excuse me Danny, but would you mind if I borrowed Sally for a while?"

"No problem." He lifted his glass slightly; "I need to go see Kelley about a refill anyway. Talk to you later Sally."

"Sure thing, Danny," the young woman answered.

"So Sis," Samantha began, "can I talk you into taking a walk along the beach with me?"

"Can you? I've wanted to go walking in the sand since I arrived. But . . . I was looking out from the patio the other night . . . it's an awfully long way down."

"I thought the same thing when Alex suggested the walk. I think she has a secret way of getting down that she's willing to impart to us." Samantha smiled at her sister. "Wanna see if Kelley has any 'to go' containers?"

"Great idea, Sam!"

Minutes later, each of them equipped with a sports bottle full of frozen Kahlua Colada, the sisters started toward the pool area.

Alex was waiting over in the far northern corner of the patio, next to what Samantha originally thought to be a second cabana, a duplicate of the one on the southern end of the same area.

"So, you two all set for a quiet walk on the beach?" Sapphire eyes sparkled in the glow of the rapidly approaching sunset. "Looks like you picked Samantha's favorite time of the day." She drew her lover close and kissed her tenderly on the top of the head. While Sally was standing at the railing looking out over the ocean, and watching the sun begin to sizzle into the water, Alex slipped a small box into Samantha's hand. "It's the necklace you bought for Sally in San Francisco; I think now might be an excellent time to give it to her."

"What a wonderful idea; you're so sweet, Alex." She slipped the box into her short's pocket and stretched up to give her lover a kiss. "I love you so much," she whispered.

"I love you, too Samantha." The raven-haired beauty confessed.

"You two ready for a little ride?"

"Ride?" Samantha questioned.

"Did you think you were going to fly down to the beach, Samantha?" Alex teased.

"No. But . . ."

Alex took out a set of keys and unlocked the door to the small stucco building. Only after they stepped inside could they see that the entire west wall was glass. Simultaneously the sisters gasped as they entered the room that was filled with a glowing pink light.

"By the Gods," Samantha stopped in mid-step. "I wasn't prepared for this view. It reminds me of home."

The innocent exclamation from her lover's lips set Alex's heart to fluttering. She knew Samantha had told her time and time again that she thought of Alternative Paradise as 'home', but the immediate ushering forth of the five-word sentence from her lover's lips caused any doubt that still floated around in the dark beauty's heart to dissipate.

While the vista from the porch was beautiful, it still admitted signs of civilization, such as the cliff side houses, the lights of La Jolla, and some of the lights from neighboring cities. This room, jutting out from the cliff top, high above the sandy beach, allowed the spectator to experience nothing but nature herself. There was not an electrical line, a telephone pole, a house or a car in sight, only the soft pinks, lavenders, and blues of a California sunset as the colors softly rained down upon the ocean and the shore.

"It's breathtaking," Sally whispered, almost to herself.

"That it is," Alex agreed. "Now let me explain the little toys you see here." She walked to a large trap door on one side of the room. "This, when opened is a slide." The expressions on the faces of the two sisters made her laugh. "Yes . . . it is a Very Long way down but the ride is absolutely thrilling."

"What happens when you get to the bottom? Seems like you would hit the sand at such a speed . . ."

"Yeah, the speed is another thrill, but it's quite safe. The sides are too high to fall out, and at the bottom of the ride there was one of those huge inflatable mats they use at the bottom of tall buildings, you know, the ones people jump onto when there's a fire."

"You're kidding!" Sally exclaimed.

"Girl Scouts honor," Alex swore, holding three fingers up in the Girl's Scout sign. "And I've been a Girl Scout for a very long time." She smiled over at Samantha. "But you can't go down that way tonight because the mat is not there. Instead . . ." she pointed to what Samantha always envisioned the elevator to look like in the children's story, Charlie and the Glass Elevator. " . . . You get to ride down in this. It's marvelous watching the ocean and beach from this level and then see it come into eye level as you slowly descend the cliff. "Nannie loved walking on the beach and thought it ridiculous to have to get into a car to drive down so . . ."

"Your family is ingenious, Alex." Samantha commented with awe.

With a proud look and nod of affirmation, the tall woman graciously agreed.

"Here's the key that operates the lift and here's the key that opens and locks this room. The door to the room automatically locks when shut to prevent people who shouldn't from having access."

Samantha took both keys from her lover's hand and gave her a parting kiss. "Thanks Alex," she whispered.

"For what Samantha."

"For loving me."

"Oh, that . . ." she merely smiled and gave Samantha a return kiss. " . . . My pleasure."

Alex opened the elevator door and shut it tightly after the sisters entered. "It's about 6:50 now; try not to be gone more than an hour, okay? I don't want to have to send the beach patrol out after the two of you."

"No problem, Honey. See you in a little while." Samantha blew her a kiss as she started the elevator descending slowly down to the beach.

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Alex watched as the elevator left the tiny building toward its sandy destination then rubbed her hands together in a sign of 'now I've got work to do'. She knew that Aurora had instructed Esmerelda, the housekeeper, to decorate the courtyard while they were all at the zoo and set up the tables and chairs, and she was anxious to see how the project was progressing. The caterers were scheduled to arrive about 7:45 so if Samantha and Sally took the entire hour the timing would be perfect.

Alex couldn't remember when she'd been more excited about a simple birthday party. Years ago she forced her parents to stop throwing the huge shindigs for her own celebrations, especially when her personal life gave her no cause for jubilation. Her own 31st was coming up in five months, and now she was finally beginning to actually look forward to the event. Thirty had been a sort of coming of age but 31 . . . well that was going to be a special occasion to be sure . . . especially now that she had someone to share her life with.

Realizing her mind was wandering from Samantha to herself, she shook the thoughts out of her head and focused on the situation at hand as she made her way back to the family area to grab a couple helpers.

"Okay everyone," Alex entered the room talking. "Samantha and Sally are out of commission for about an hour; they're down on the beach doing a sister chat. Who wants to come help set up?"

Knowing there would be no lack of volunteers she laughed as every hand in the room, except her parents', went up.

"Come on then, everyone get a refill and let's get started."

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The ride to the beach was slow and steady and the sisters watched as the sun bid its final farewell of the evening to the heavens then dipped tenderly into the sea.

"You're so lucky, Sammie, for being able to look out your window every night and watch this miracle happen." Sally pointed out toward the expanse of ocean and sand before them.

"Yeah, it's a beautiful sight. But the lake at twilight is also beautiful, just in a different way. Even though the differences are great, the feelings that each area evokes can be very much alike. You might lose the roar of the ocean but you in turn receive the mystical silence of the lake. I can

remember listening to the frogs croaking, the crickets chirping, and the owls screeching, or watching the fireflies dancing between the trees and bushes in the spring and fall."

"How about the squirrels and raccoons that would come to visit unannounced and totally uninvited as far as Mom and Dad were concerned?" Sally laughed.

"Oh, yeah, that was always a fun time! "But even Mom and Dad like to watch the does bring their babies to the water's edge. Remember?"

"Yeah. It's nice to remember the good times Sammie."

Samantha looked at her sister with misty eyes. "As beautiful as it is here, when I stop to think about it, I do miss scenes like that."

Not wanting to talk about home too much, Sally changed the subject back to the differences between the two lays of the land by reminding her sister of the difference in the animals present in the ocean here in California.

"That's true, we have the whales and the dolphins as they migrate south for the winter months, but we don't have the animal sounds at night like on the lake. Of course, the ocean's roar is hauntingly mesmerizing."

"Have you listened to yourself talk lately, Sam?" her sister asked.

"What do you mean; has my accent changed or something?"

"No there is a new word in your vocabulary that you use whenever you're talking about what's happening in your life."

A confused expression crossed her sister's face. "Okay, I'll bite?"

"*We* has become a part of almost everything you say." She smiled over at Samantha and put an arm around her waist. "And ya know what?"

"No, what?"

"It sounds so natural."

"It feels natural, Sally. I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life. I love where I'm living, I love my job and most of all . . . I love Alex."

There was a slight lull in the conversation and the two stopped walking to face the ocean and watch the waves gently rolling toward the shore. The soft swishing of the whitecaps as they broke and trickled toward the sand was, in deed, hypnotizing.

Still looking out to sea, Samantha finally accumulated enough nerve to ask her sister the question that had been churning around in her mind for the past couple days. Not wanting to ruin the mood, but also not wanting Sally to leave without the discussion she cleared her throat and turned to her sibling.

"Sally, I know something's bothering you . . ."

"No Sammie, what would make you . . ."

"Stop - this is probably the only chance we'll have to be alone together before you leave tomorrow. I have to spend time with the other people who all put their lives on hold to come this weekend or this evening, but this time is for us and I know something is making you unhappy. Is it Dad?"

Samantha put her hands on Sally's shoulders and turned her sister so they were standing nose-to-nose; it was almost like looking into the mirror a few years back. She watched, as her sister's soft green eyes began to glisten, tears involuntarily trickling down the sweet face.

"Come here, you." Samantha gathered the younger woman close, stroking her hair with motherly caresses, her own emerald eyes beginning to tear. "I'm so sorry, Sally. This is all my fault."

Sally's body became rigid as she pulled away from her sister's loving touch.

"Now I'm telling you to stop, Samantha. Stop blaming yourself for being happy, for finding what every person in the entire world searches for and many never find. Don't you Ever be sorry for being in love and being loved in return. Dad's an ass-hole; we've both known that for years. The only difference is that now Mom is not totally agreeing with him so he's getting out of control."

"What do you mean 'not totally agreeing with him' and how is he getting out of control? Has he hurt her? Has he hurt You?"

"Sammie sometimes I think you live in a fantasy world. You have this unrealistic concept that people are good and have a difficult time seeing them for what they really are. You were always Dad's favorite, probably because he made you believe that everything he ever did for us was out of love and kindness. But that wasn't the truth."

"Sally . . ."

"Sam you wanted to know - let me finish."

"Okay, I'm sorry."

"See how easily those two words flow from your lips Samantha? That was why Dad always got his way with you . . . you were always trying to please . . . always 'sorry'. When you didn't do exactly what he wanted, all he ever needed to do was tell you how disappointed he was and you would bow under. Consequently, he felt that at least he could dance you around like a puppet.

The situation in Laguna ripped the rug out from under him. He never thought you would ever do anything to go against him, no less with his greatest competitor. So you see, Sammie, his anger is All about Him, just as all our lives have been all about Him. We were always, His Family, His Wife, His Girls - we were merely playthings he arranged to his advantage in the world he created."

"Sally if you've felt this way all along . . . "

"Ever since you left home, Samantha, he's gotten worse with Mom. We never told you because both of us agreed you were better off away from him and we certainly didn't want to bring you back into the middle of the hell he was creating for us to live in. I moved out but not far; I didn't want to leave Mom totally alone."

Anger replaced the sympathy that had been playing across Samantha's face. "So you neglected to tell me what was happening because it might disturb my Happiness?"

"Something like that but . . ."

"Sally, she's my Mom, too."

"Yes, but that's the way she wanted it. She's so proud of you Samantha. It breaks her heart not to be able to call and tell you so . . ."

"Before this visit is over we will have a plan about calling, you can count on it! I'll give you the money to purchase some phone cards. That way she can call and he'll never know. Here I was thinking she didn't want to talk to me any more than Dad did."

"No Sammie . . . that is so wrong."

"Okay, let's go back a bit - I asked if he's been physical with either of you?"

"Remember how he used to push Mom around a little when he was inebriated?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he's pushed her a couple times and once he . . . well . . . he . . ."

"Damn it Sally, he what?!"

"Mom started to talk about you and Alex and he slapped her across the face and told her "never mention that bitch's name in my house."

"Why doesn't she leave him, Sally?"

"And go where? Do what? That's not an option right now. You know Mom, she just acts like everything is as it always has been."



"But it isn't . . . and this isn't right. It can't continue like this Sally, you . . . I . . . we have to talk some sense into her. The two of you can relocate here . . . to Laguna. Let me talk it over with Alex. I'm sure the two of you could stay in the suite until you find a place of your own. We might even find something that Mom could do at the Center."

Samantha's heart lightened a little as she thought of all the ways she could help now where she never could have before. She was sure Alex would be accommodating; after all, they already talked about having Sally come down more often.

"Sammie, I . . . Mom and I couldn't ask you to do that."

"It's not a question of asking me, Sally, I'm offering. Is Mom ready to leave him?"

"I don't know we haven't really talked about that. But if you're positive that Alex wouldn't mind . . ."

"I'll talk to her about it tonight."

"NO!" The younger woman was emphatic.

"What?"

"You let Alex make your birthday the wonderful affair she wants it to be. I see the expression on her face when you smile. She's gone through a lot of trouble, not to mention an exorbitant amount of money."

"More than she should, if you ask me." Samantha mumbled.

"And more than you deserve is what I'm sure you're thinking." Sally said ruefully. You see . . . that's Dad talking . . . he always made us feel undeserving . . . think about it." She pleaded with her sister. "Now . . . please say you won't spoil Alex's plans for your vacation Sammie, please . . . promise me. Promise like we used to when we were kids . . . Promise Samantha."

"Sally . . ." Samantha countered.

"You can be so damn thick headed at times Samantha Reneé Riley! Did you ever think that maybe Alex doesn't want money to be a wedge between the two of you? It should be obvious she has more than enough of it to lavish you with whatever you could possibly wish for." Sally looked hard into her sister's face.

"You love her and she definitely loves you. Giving to you makes her happy, so why can't you learn to receive gracefully? You know, learning to say 'Thank You' is as necessary as learning to say 'You're Welcome.' Samantha you've found Princess Charming -- live happily ever after! That said, I reiterate . . . Promise me Samantha! Promise you won't ask Alex until after your vacation, or I Promise you I won't even tell Mom we had this conversation."

"Okay, okay . . . I'll try."

"That's not good enough!"

"You're a brat do you realize that, Little Sis?"

"Yeah, now say the rhyme." The younger woman watched as her sister mentally squirmed and then began reciting the saying they used to sing as children: "Okay, here goes,

By Irish Leprechaun's delight

By all the stars that shine each night

I'll never find the 'pot of gold'

If I break this Promise once it is told.

Are you satisfied now?"

"And the promise?"

"I promise I won't say anything to Alex during our vacation about you and Mom coming to Laguna to live and work."

"Not good enough - you won't say anything about those two things until you talk to me *after* you're back in Laguna."

"Okay."

"Okay what."

"Okay what you said Sally."

"No Samantha you need to say it, I know you, you'll weasel out by the dropping of a word here and there . . . go ahead . . . say it."

With a huge sigh she started all over again. "I promise I won't say anything to Alex about you and Mom coming to Laguna to live and work until after we get home and I've talked to you. There, now that's all I'm going to do - you'll have to take me at my word."

"Spit in your hand and we'll shake."

"Come on Sally that's childish."

"Do it or you'll be cursed forever and the Leprechauns will no longer smile upon you. You don't want that to happen now do you. They might just take Alex away." For the first time in many minutes there was a smile on the young woman's face as she teased her big sister.

"Damn you're persistent -- wherever did you get that trait?" Samantha was also feeling a little better realizing that she at least there was a plan to offer her Mom and sister. She spit in her right hand, while Sally did the same into her own, then the sisters shook hands, sharing spit.

"Okay, that's settled, can we go back to your party now? My cup's about empty and I'm getting hungry."

Samantha reached into her short's pocket and brought out the small box Alex had handed her earlier. She put it into her sister's hand.

"What's this Sammie?"

"Open the box, Silly, you can't tell from the outside."

Inside the small gray box was the Buddha necklace Samantha purchased when they were down in Chinatown, during the San Francisco trip.

"Sammie it's beautiful," Sally exclaimed. "You shouldn't have."

"Remember 'thank you' is as good as 'you welcome'." She grinned throwing the words back at her sister. "We picked it up for you when we were in San Francisco. The last time we visited turned out to be not a good time for the exchanging of gifts. Do you really like it, Sally."

"I really do sis. Thank you."

"You're Welcome." Samantha smiled.

Sally gave Samantha a bear hug and a kiss then insisted they start back up to the house.

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"Wow! Alex this looks awesome," Sonny exclaimed walking through the archway leading into the courtyard. "Samantha is going to adore this theme."

Since she was unable to take Samantha to Greece this year with the cruise ship like she wanted to do, Alex decided to bring the splendor of Ancient Greece to the Spanish-style Villa in Southern California, complete with Gods and Goddesses.

"I was going to try and make it costume, but I'm afraid it would have been a little too difficult to pull off on such short notice. I can envision you, Sonny, wrapped in a toga."

"I am so glad you didn't go that route," Danny mentioned as he walked further into the room. "I'm afraid I would have had to pass."

Suzanne was looking around with her mouth hanging open. "This must have taken hours."

"Yes, they started right after we left this morning. But they did one helluva job!" Alex commented. Esmerelda got the entire staff to help.

The entire courtyard had been turned into what one might think the main hall of Olympus would have looked like. There were gold-trimmed columns covered with vines, a small self-contained fountain in the middle and statues of a few hand picked Goddesses lined the walls, Artemis, Aphrodite, Athena, Clotho, and the Muse Calliope. At the far end of the court sat two thrones, draped in royal purple for the guest of honor and her consort.

"Well, that's one way to make her 'queen for a day'." Sonny chuckled, as he looked the room over.

"Where did you find these statues?" Suzanne asked walking over and reading the small plaque on one of them.

"Actually, Mom did the research." Alex confessed. "There's a little theatre group here in La Jolla that specializes in Greek plays. They have all the Muses and most of the major Gods and Goddesses. She called and since they are in between plays they were more than happy to rent out some of the statues and props."

"Samantha is going to be so surprised - you really outdid yourself Alex." Ray interjected.

"Yes, it is rather impressive, isn't it?" She beamed in the direction of her old friend.

Looking around at the empty tables Sonny put the question to words that was on everyone's mind "So, when does the food arrive? I know Sammie's going to be starving, we haven't eaten since lunch."

"Timely question," Aurora announced walking in with an entourage following her. Even though Alex decided against a costumed affair, the catering staff had been instructed to dress as Greek servants to enhance the illusion. They swarmed in carrying boxes of food that need to be unpacked and arranged on the banquet table set up on one of the walls. Aurora was in her glory as she began playing hostess.

"Samantha and Sally should be coming back any minute now." Alex commented, then got all of her friends' attention and pointed to a table near the thrones. "This table's for the gifts. If you all want to go freshen up a little and get your presents, we should all meet back here as soon as possible. I won't bring them in until everyone's back but it may be difficult acting natural with the entire court yard void of guests - so hurry."

With that the little group scattered, each off to their own room. Marcy and Von stood by Alex watching for a minute or two while the caterers went about setting everything up. It looked just the way she pictured in her mind. As she mentioned earlier the only thing that would have made it better was if she had gotten everyone into costumes.

Marcy put their gift on the assigned table and turned to Alex. "We could come out to the pool with you and keep Samantha occupied until you were sure everyone was here."

"That's a great idea, Marcy. There hasn't been much of a chance for her to visit with the two of you and that would seem logical. In fact, why don't you two go ahead? I need to talk to Mom for a minute and then I'll be right out."

"Okay, see ya there."

Aurora had always been a shining light in Alex's life, supporting her daughter through many tough decisions and being a constant in her life when the consequences were grave. It was only right that her Mom be here now during the happiest of times.

She approached her mother with such warmth in her heart it almost made her cry. "Mom."

The older woman turned from the chore of instructing and looked at her daughter. "What is it Alex?"

"I just want to thank you again for helping to pull this entire weekend off. It's been marvelous! I don't think I could have done it without you and Kelley." She approached her mother and gave her a hug and kiss. "I love you Mom."

"I love you, too, Alex. This has been a lot of fun. I haven't planned a birthday party in years." She gave her daughter an almost sorrowful look. "You and Kelley are party poopers! This just got me worked up, again. You do realize that I will Not be Stopped from having a blow-out of a party on your 31st?"

"I know, Mom. And, you know what?"

"No, what?"

"Now that I have Samantha and so much to look forward to, I'm ready for another birthday party."

Aurora saw the look in her daughter's eyes and smiled back at sapphire orbs that so resembled the ones she looked into every evening in the mirror. Her heart filled with the love she felt for her daughter and the happiness she saw on her face.

"She's special Alex, we love her, too."

"That means the world to me Mom."

Aurora wiped at the tear that trickled down her daughter's face and Alex quickly shook her head, regaining her composure.

"Anyway, I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate this weekend. I'd better go catch up with Marcy. Kelley's putting my present on the table, right?"

"Right, Honey, go get the birthday girl." She smiled as she watched Alex leave the room then turned back to supervising the caterers.

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Moonlight now highlighted the silhouettes of the two small figures as they slowly made their way back to the elevator. Sally felt better that she had confided in her sister about the difficulties they were experiencing at home and Samantha felt that a weight had been lifted knowing she now possessed a plan to help her sister and mother, if her mom was ready to make a life change.

When they reached the lift Samantha turned to Sally and gave her a hug, the pressure and length of which imparted all the love she felt for her sibling.

"Things will turn out for the best, Honey; I know they will," Samantha assured the younger woman. "We'll get you and Mom both out of harm's way. I know Mom will fight giving up the house. It holds so many happy memories for her, but a clean break and fresh start may be just what she needs to start feeling good about herself."

"She may not have to give up the house Samantha, just divorcing him might be enough. But the offer to come to California is a selfless one and I'm sure she'll appreciate it."

"Whatever - I guess we can't go speculating until after everyone involved has a chance to give their input, including Dad."

"Yeah. But, I think now is the time for us to put this conversation to rest and proceed with the situation at hand."

"Huh?"

"Party time, Big Sis . . . Party Time!!"

"I don't know about a Party -- but I'm sure it's about time for Dinner!"

Samantha unlocked the door and they stepped into the elevator. Putting another of the keys into the operations box and twisting, the lift slowly began its ascent back up the cliff to the Villa.

They exited the elevator and Samantha locked up like Alex showed her before stepping out of the small building onto the patio.

Sally was taken back by the presence of Marcy and Von as they stood looking out at the ocean. "Hey, what are you two doing here? I thought everyone would be inside gossiping."

"We came out for a little fresh air and when we looked down toward the beach we saw you two approaching the elevator. We thought we'd wait for you to get back up." Marcy admitted.

"I'm glad you did. We've hardly gotten a chance to talk and I know you have to go home sometime tonight." Samantha stated, walking over to her friends.

"Yeah, but the night's still young," Von chimed in. "And, I don't have to work in the morning so I can drive home."

"Did Alex give you any idea when dinner would arrive?" Samantha asked. "My stomach thinks I went on a diet."

"Your stomach knows better than to think that," her sister giggled, receiving a loving push on the shoulder from Samantha.

"Well, we told Alex to come out and get us when it arrived. So we can wait here for her or go on . . ."

"We can wait here and talk. If you asked her to come get you, I'm sure she will." Samantha no sooner had the words out than Alex came waltzing through the door.

"Looks like everybody who isn't already in the dining area is here. Anyone ready to eat?"

"Silly question," was the simultaneous answer received from four hungry guests.

Alex put her arm around Samantha as they began walking back into the house. She bent down and whispered, "I missed you while you were gone, did you accomplish what you set out to?" She then looked up at the rest of the small group. "We've set up in the courtyard - Kelley has the bar open, follow me."

Latching onto Alex's waist Samantha looked up, and sporting a smile she shook her head affirmatively. "Tell you about it later."

"You got a deal." Alex mouthed back at her, then turned to get Marcy's attention. "Hey you're almost as familiar with this place as I am - take the lead Marcy, I want to talk to Samantha a second.

"Sure thing Alex but don't take too long . . . I'm really hungry and I wouldn't want all the food to be gone before Sammie got a chance to eat."

"If you know what's good for you," Samantha chortled, "you just go get something to drink. We won't be far behind, you can bet on it."

"Gotcha!" Marcy laughed and gave the small blonde a wink before placing an arm around the waist of the two women she was escorting.

"Sorry Samantha, can't wait until later to hear what you two talked about," Alex confessed when the other three were out of hearing range. "But you do look a little relieved, am I reading you right?"

"Yeah, I am somewhat relieved because I know what's going on, but it is as bad as I anticipated. Mom really needs to get rid of him this time."

Frowning down at Samantha, Alex shook her head, "That bad, huh?"

"Fraid so. It's just a question of talking her into doing what's best for her."

"Samantha don't you think she knows what's best for herself?"

"I honestly don't think so, Alex. He's been controlling her for so long, I think she's forgotten how to think without him putting the thoughts into her head and when she does remember and strikes out on her own, he knocks her down."

"Physically?" Now Alex was really getting concerned.

"Most of the time just mentally, Alex, but you know what a control freak he is . . . you've dealt with him."

"I know, Honey." She didn't want to put a damper on the party that was about to take place, but she also didn't want to put a pressing family crisis on the back burner. "Do you think we should try to intervene Samantha? You know your mom and sister are always welcome to come stay with us?"

With her heart overflowing from the impact of her lover's proposition she stopped walking and gave Alex a hug of appreciation. *I didn't even have to break my promise to get the relief my mind needed about having them come to California. Thank you Alex.*

"What was that for?" Alex queried, not letting the small blonde retrieve her arms.

"For being you, for being so understanding, for caring so much. When we talked Sally and I decided that she would go ahead and talk to Mom when she went home. We don't have to make any decisions until after we get back from vacation. I love you Alex, please . . . don't ever change." Standing on her toes her face inclined toward the one that made her days shine, she posed for a kiss.

Alex leaned down for their lips to tenderly meet. "I won't, if you won't, my Destiny." Came the solemn response before the fiery kiss. Again Samantha's heart skipped a beat. "Come on, my Sweet, let's go eat."



"You don't need to repeat that one." Samantha let loose her hold of Alex's waist but grabbed her hand.

Before they even got to the archway the tantalizing odors wafted through the halls, deliciously assaulting their nostrils.

"By the Gods that smells marvelous, Alex. What did your Mom order?"

They were now standing directly in front of the courtyard. "'By the Gods' exactly Samantha. Welcome to Olympus!"

For the second time in three days the unsuspecting blonde heard a singular word joyously escaping the lips of her little group of friends . . . SURPRISE!

Continued in Part 6.

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### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## Part 6

### Chapter 6

Samantha stood frozen to the spot; it was absolutely unbelievable that Alex could have carried this off without her having the slightest inkling as to what was happening. She was sure that the birthday party had been on Friday. But then thinking back, there were no presents and what's a birthday party without presents, even though she didn't expect anything more from any of the Dorians, she probably should have expected that her friends would have given her gifts. With all the other excitement of the weekend, the idea of presents slipped her mind completely. All these thoughts ran through her mind as she stood next to Alex staring out onto a scene that was in her expectation almost what she would have envisioned Olympus to look like.

"I don't know what to say. Look at this place. How did you transform it in such a short amount of time?"

"I had a lot of help from Mom, Kelley, Esmerelda, the entire staff here at Cielo en Tierra, and then of course your friends out there."

As usual Samantha couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face, but they had a difficult time maneuvering around the constant smile. "Believe it or not . . . I'm speechless."

"Well then, while you're going around trying to find words, let me say the two that everyone here wants to hear - Let's Eat!" Sonny approached the duo and took Samantha from Alex's side.

"Come on Sammie we're all starving so I know you've got to be."

"As a matter of fact you couldn't be any more right." She smiled at her friend and allowed herself to be led over to the banquet table.

"You'll be sitting right here at the head and Alex, of course, will be at the other end." Sonny started to inform the blonde.

"Oh, no - I don't want her all the way down there. Let Kelley have the other end, after all she's mistress of this mansion, so to speak." She smiled hoping that no one would be upset because she wanted Alex to sit beside her instead of all the way down at the end of the table."

"Don't fret. Alex can sit in your lap for all we care, we just want to eat." He turned and faced the group. "Right Gods and Goddesses of Olympus?"

"Right!" The word thundered through the courtyard as everyone answered at once.

"So, Goddess Samantha, mistress of all you survey - give the word so that we lesser immortals may partake of the feast."

With a wave of her hand she played right into Sonny's theatrics, and Alex silently wished she dressed everyone in costumes.

It was at this point that Aurora took over center stage. "Okay boys and girls - so these fine servers do not have to spend the rest of the evening explaining what you are putting into your mouths, I've asked the head of the catering staff to explain what each dish is - that is the ones that need explaining. With a wave of her hand she turned the explanation of the buffet table over to a tall dark-haired man dressed in a toga.

"Hi, I'm Andrew . . ."

"Hi Andrew," everyone chimed in, grinning at each other.

"Anyway Ms. Dorian has asked me to tell you a little about some of the food you are about to sample." He walked over to the first entrée on the table. "The Greeks call this dish Fresh Tuna Souvlaki, it's really rather a simple marinated, skewered and grilled tuna served on a bed of couscous. Couscous looks like it might be a small grain of rice but it is actually a dish prepared from semolina flour, which makes it a pasta. One of the more well known of the Greek pastas is orzo; it looks like a large grain of rice, and we have a sample of that here in these ramekins combined with a sautéed shrimp." He moved further down the table, pointing to each entrée. "This is a baked shrimp dish, topped with Feta. For those of you who eat meat, we have prepared a roast chicken with hilopittes noodles; the dish is called Kottopoula chilopittes. Over here we have a typical Greek salad with olives and Feta cheese. Feta is one of the more popular of the Greek cheeses and is made from goats milk; the color is white and it is a cheese that you can crumble into a variety of dishes."

At the far end of the buffet he picked up a dessert plate. "Finally there is the dessert that usually everyone is familiar with - Greek Baklava, a sweet, cinnamon flavored pastry which uses the thin delicate Phyllo dough arranged in layers.

"Well, there you have your meal, which I may add is fit for the Gods." He smiled specifically in the direction of Samantha. "As the Greeks would say, "Trogo kai Apolambano! (Eat and Enjoy). By the way one of your hostesses picked out some superb liquors to tickle your palates -- there is a lovely Greek Bordeaux called Gerovasiliou, it is one of the eight bests wines in the world and even Dionysus would have been proud to serve it. On a sweeter note there is a bottle of Ouzo which is made from aniseed and has a delicate licorice flavor, and lastly she purchased a bottle of Metaxa Private Reserve . . ."

It was at this point that Kelley politely interrupted the speaker. "I would like to say that the Metaxa is reserved for after dinner; it's a sipping brandy and will be opened as a nightcap." She turned to Andrew, "Thank you Andrew for letting us know all about the meal." Then getting a glint in her eyes she added, "By the way that toga is very . . ." she cleared her throat and grinned, "fashionable." Turning back to the group she announced, "Now everyone, grab a plate and dig in."

Not having to be told twice the buffet table was swarmed upon and within seconds the elegance of the table was destroyed as food disappeared out of the trays and onto dishes.

"Alex," Samantha whispered as they stood back and allowed their guests to fill their plates.  
"How did you get all this done in a weekend."

"I've known for a while when your birthday was Samantha." Sapphire blues gleamed as they drank in the excitement of the small blonde's face. "Mom and Kelley did a lot of the preparation down here. I'm glad Mom's in the middle of a book, that means she's around and has a little extra time on her hands. She loved getting this all set up. When I was little you should have seen the theme parties she used to throw." The reminiscing thought brought a sad smile as she realized how selfish she was the last few years by not allowing her mother to celebrate like this on her birthdays. She promised herself that no matter what she would never take that joy away from her mom again. "They did good, didn't they?" She asked Samantha.

"Good is definitely an understatement. As soon as we eat I need to take a look around the room. From what I can see at a distance . . . you, or Aurora, have assembled all my favorite Goddesses." She began pointing, "There's Artemis and . . ." looking in the opposite direction she pointed again, " . . . Aphrodite." On the other side of the room she spotted another statue. "I think that's one of the Muses . . ."

"Calliope," Alex offered. "The eldest of the Muses and her specialty was epic poetry, I thought that appropriate. We tried to find a statue of Sappho but . . ." Shrugging her shoulders she gave Samantha a hug and steered her closer to the food table.

"Gee, no Sappho?" the smaller woman teased then continued her praise. "You even went to the trouble of ordering Greek food."

"It wasn't trouble Samantha, it was fun. Just to watch the look on your face when you entered the courtyard - everything was worth that one look."

"This is so unbelievable," Samantha stated as she looked around the room at all her friends and family, her heart was nearly bursting she was so happy. "Looks like everyone is having a great time, Alex. This has been a fantastic mini-vacation for Sally; she adores Sonny and thinks Aurora is fantastic." Looking up into her lover's eyes she continued, "Of course, she thinks I'm the luckiest woman in the world for having found you."

"Yeah, what does she know?" Alex kidded.

"Really - she told me I found by Princess Charming and that I should now live *Happily Ever After*."

Alex laughed and pulled her close. "I'll agree to the happily ever after line."

"Yeah, come on Princess Charming - let's get you something to eat."

The cuisine pleased every palate, and talk was minimal during the course of the meal. Around the time everyone finished, Kelley stood and raised her goblet high.

"A toast to my daughter-in-law . . . may this be just the beginning of many celebrations. Thank you for allowing us to share in your happiness Samantha. Happy Birthday."

That was the cue for the caterer to bring out the birthday cake, a replica of the Greek Parthenon.

Samantha's hands flew to her face, "By the Gods -- would you just look at the size of that cake."

"It would have been impossible to make it right and have it much smaller," Aurora confided.

"Come here birthday girl. Time for the singing and cutting of the cake."

Samantha walked over to her mother-in-law and stood next to her. The candles were glowing brightly when someone turned off the lights and all began to sing. By the end of the song, tears were streaming down the celebrant's face but from the smile on the same it would have been obvious even to a stranger that they were tears of joy. Samantha had no problem making a wish, one to last a lifetime. She wished to be by Alex's side from this day on until the day when one of them was no longer bound to this earth. Commencing to blow out the 29 candles (Aurora informed her that the extra two were for luck and to grow on.) she took a deep breath. Her father always told her she was full of hot air and this situation definitely revealed his statement to be true. In one large breath she extinguished all 29 at once. A huge hooray went up from the small crowd and then the lights came on. Just as Samantha was about to cut the first piece of cake from the shrine of Athena Alex stopped her, took the knife out of her hand and placed it on the table.

"Wait. We have a tradition in this family and since you are now one of Us you must also abide by it."

"What kind of tradition," the small blonde asked.

"The birthday girl must bite the first piece of cake before cutting."

"Bite the cake, as in reach down with my head . . ."

"Yep." Alex was all smiles.

"You're kidding?"

"Most definitely she is not," Aurora chimed in. "She's right, it's a family tradition so . . ." she motioned toward the cake.

Samantha looked over at Kelley as her last resort for help, but received none.

"Sorry Samantha," the older woman replied, "I'm afraid I have to go along with them on this one. Take a bite."

"Okay." Samantha leaned down to take a bite out of one of the columns when she felt a slight pressure on the back of her neck. A flash went off as she looked forward and Ray took a picture of her as her face was being pressed further into the cake. Pulling back, her face rimmed with

icing, she noticed Danny over in the corner running the camcorder and Ray snapping more photos. Being a sport she ran her tongue out over her lips, making sounds of enjoyment as she continued. Smiling broadly as the cameras continued to snap, she took her hands and scooped the surplus sweetness off her face. With one quick motion the totality of cake and icing went from her hands to Alex's face, catching the dark-haired beauty by surprise.

"Delicious cake, isn't it Alex?" She laughed along with the rest of the room.

Taking the damp towel being offered, she wiped the residue from her face and then reached up and did the same for Alex.

"Nice tradition," she smiled.

"Yeah, but that last little act wasn't part of it."

"All right, who wants cake?" Aurora asked picking up the knife and proceeding to cut into the 'shrine'.

Alex took Samantha by the arm and led her up to the throne chair. "I appoint Sonny as court jester and he may give the Queen her gifts."

"Oh good, group participation." With enthusiasm Sonny took his cake with him over to the present table, set it down and picked up the first gift. "Looks like this one is from Aurora and Kelley." He handed to the reigning Queen.

"Hey, but you already gave me . . ." Alex nudged her in the side and as Sam turned to say something, she caught her sister's eye and remembered their little talk. ". . . Thank you," she mumbled before even opening the present. The gift was heavy and from first guess she would have thought it to be a book. *Maybe something new Aurora has written that I haven't read yet*, she hoped to herself. Easing the paper off she saw that she was right; it was a book, but not one of Aurora's. It was a huge red synonym finder. "This is gigantic!" Samantha held up the book for all to see. Looking over toward Kelley and Aurora she thanked them.

"It's something every writer should never be without," the popular author told her protégé. When you're ready we'll deal with the 'how to' aspect of publishing. Happy Birthday, Honey."

Samantha looked down at the book and thumbed through it for a second or two before Sonny graciously relieved her of the new treasure and placed another package into her hands.

"Plenty of time to check everything out later, now it's time to open," he smiled at his friend. "This one's from Ray and me," he beamed.

"I should have known by the paper," she giggled as she opened the foot long cylindrical rainbow colored present. "I'll tell you, though, there's no way in Tartarus I could guess what's inside."

"That's what opening is all about," Ray piped in from a few feet away.

Popping the top off one of the ends, Samantha looked inside and then placed two fingers in to gently coax out the delicate parchment papers that were rolled up like a scroll. Unrolling it the first page read: Astrologic data Virgo/Libra, September 19 to September 23. "Sonny . . . Ray . . . I love this kind of stuff."

"That's just the beginning, Sweetness," Sonny moved her along, "go a few pages further."

Obedying his instructions she came to a section done beautifully in calligraphy which was entitled: *Personal Numerology Horoscope for Samantha Reneé Riley*.

"This is beautiful, you guys!" She looked up at her friends and then over at Alex.

"There's another cylinder on the table, identical to this one but it has Alex's horoscope in it," Sonny divulged. "We didn't think it would be much fun to have one without the other so we did them both at the same time. I must admit I skimmed through . . ."

"Tell the truth," Ray insisted, "You read them from start to finish." He smiled at his lover and then over at their two friends. "I'll admit, I kinda glanced over his shoulder."

"That's okay," Samantha exclaimed. "I can't wait to go over these, maybe we'll have a little time later tonight. Thank you, thank you."

"You can add a thank you for your mother-in-law, the artistic one, she knows the numerologist personally." Sonny glanced over at Aurora and nodded his head, she acknowledged with a little wave and courtly smile.

"Then most definitely a thank you goes to Mom over there in the corner." Samantha watched the play of emotions spread across the older woman's face as the sapphire eyes that so matched the ones Samantha loved began to glisten involuntarily.

Aurora smiled sweetly over at her new daughter-in-law then turned to Kelley, embarrassed that her show of emotion was so very obvious.

"Now there, my little actress, they're all family," Kelley whispered softly into her lover's ear.

Aurora looked up and grinned, whispering back, "So . . . do you think that might mean we'll have a granddaughter somewhere in our future?"

"Perhaps my love, but you know it could be a grandson?"

"Anything's possible." She hugged her mate and then turned back to continue watching as Samantha opened the rest of her presents.

The birthday girl had already gotten the wrapping off the present her mother sent down and she and Alex were going over the first few pages.

"Finally," Alex muttered.

"Finally what?" Samantha inquired.

"I finally get to see a little of what you were like as a child." She caught the attention of Sally who was now standing on the other side of Sam and gave her a message to take home to Sheila. "Tell your mother I said thank you. Can you do that?"

"Sure I can, Alex. Mom likes you - honestly." The fair-haired younger version of Samantha smiled at her sister-in-law and then back down at the childhood album her mother secretly and painstakingly fawned over since the horrific day their family had been torn apart by the untimely news of Samantha's being a lesbian. Reaching down, she shut the large book. "You do have other gifts, Sis," she reminded Samantha, putting a medium-sized box in her sister's lap. "This one is mostly from me."

"Mostly?"

"You'll see what I mean when you open it."

With her curiosity spiked Sam made quick work of unwrapping the box only to find a plain brown box underneath which bespoke nothing of the contents. Pulling off the tape she finally managed to get it open. There were six videotapes in plastic boxes lying inside. Picking up the first, Samantha read the printed label *Welcome Samantha 1972*. Alex reached in and picked up another, which was labeled *Samantha's School Projects (various years)*.

"I know what we're going to be doing in our spare time for a while. Thank you, Sally." Alex got up and gave the younger woman a kiss on the cheek. "I couldn't have asked for Samantha to receive a nicer present."

Laughing at the response of her lover, Samantha turned to Sally with a questioning look. "Why didn't you just wait until Christmas, and give them to **Her** then?" She put the videos down and stood up to give her sister a hug. "Who got all the movies together to do this, you?"

"Mom put them together. She spliced all the old super eight silent stuff onto larger reels when Dad was at meetings and then when he went away on a trip, we put everything in order. I took them down to have them put onto video. We also had the company splice together the newer stuff that was already on video. I got a copy for Mom, too." Returning her sister's hug she confessed, "It was really a fun project Sam; it's been forever since we watched most of them."

"Thank you Sally. You don't know how much these mean to me . . . I guess I mean . . . to US. Alex seems as excited about this gift as I am, maybe even more so; now she gets to sit and laugh at my silly growing up stuff."

"I'm glad you like them Sammie there's a lot of love in those old movies."



"Okay kiddies," Sonny interrupted, "time to sit back down and open the last three gifts." He handed her a large box from Alex.

"Honey . . ." Samantha turned and looked at Alex, ". . . I thought we decided that the weekend and the rest of our vacation was plenty?"

"I think that was your decision," was the quick response. "Did I agree to that?"

"I thought you did."

"Samantha open your present; it's just something little and fun."

Samantha grinned and shook her head knowing she had no control over Alex's inability to stop buying for her. After the conversation with Sonny and the one with Sally earlier she decided to stop feeling guilty and to just enjoy being treated like a queen. Before the paper was completely off she could see the printing on the box underneath and began to giggle. "Alex what ever made you purchase this?"

"I don't know; I thought maybe some night when we were bored we might give it a try."

"Bored?"

"Just kidding - Sonny and I were talking the other day, they have one and he says it's addicting."

"Just what we need another addiction." The smile on her face belied any words that came out of her mouth as she mouthed the words *'thank you'* to her lover. She opened the box and played with the controller. "Now all I need are some games to go along with this PlayStation."

"This girl of yours wants everything," Sonny contended as Samantha handed him the box in exchange for the next gift.

Samantha read the touching card from her newest of friends, Marcy and Von, and began opening their gift. Inside the large box she found another wrapped box and inside that another. When she finally reached the end of the boxes she was sitting with a rainbow colored envelope in her possession. There was an odd look on her face as she opened the envelope, only to spot another smaller printed envelope . . . Universal Amphitheatre. She read it out loud. "Universal Amphitheatre?"

"Sounds like a fun gift, Samantha, keep opening," Alex motivated the blonde to continue.

Inside the final envelope were two tickets to an Ellen Degeneres concert on October 1st. When it finally sunk in what the gift was, she dropped the tickets onto her lap and her hands flew up to her face. "By the Gods, I love Ellen. But what is a Universal Amphitheatre? I thought Universal was like a theme park?"

"It is," Von answered, "but they also have a theatre there where they hold concerts. We thought it would be fun to take you two to see Ellen. We got super seating, first row . . . they call it intimate seating, should be great! I, for one, can't wait!"

"Wow! Me either. This is such a good surprise - thank you." She got up and gave her friends a thank you hug and kiss, then sat back down next to Alex.

Marcy added to the conversation, "You're really welcome Samantha, we just wanted you to know how much we value you and Alex as friends. We don't have a lot of friends and . . . well . . . Alex and I go back a long way."

"Looks like I made out on this birthday as well," Alex commented. Guess that's the plus side of being half of a duo. What do you think of making it an entire day? We can do Universal in the morning and afternoon and then the show in the evening?"

"Sounds great to me," Von admitted. "I haven't been to Universal in eons. I know there's a lot of new stuff."

"If Vonnie's game, I am, too. It's also been a while since I've been to Universal," Marcy affirmed.

"Well, it definitely has my vote," the birthday girl chimed in. "I've never been, so anything about it would be new to me."

"If you four are done discussing going some place fun without the rest of us, maybe Samantha could open her final gift." Sonny butted into the existing conversation.

"I'm sorry, Sonny, we didn't mean to exclude . . ."

"I'm kidding with you, Sweetness. Here open your last present."

"I guess this is from the two of you," Samantha assumed as she glanced over at Suz and Danny.

"Yeah, we received a little help deciding on what to get you. You've become an extremely difficult person to buy for." Suz answered her friend.

With the statement Suz just disclosed, Samantha was hoping that the gift might be a game to go with the new PlayStation. In no way was she disappointed, she opened not one, but two games, and happily raised them high for all to see - Tomb Raider I and Q-Bert. "I can see I'm going to have to fit some coordinated hand play into my schedule." She smiled over at her friends.

"Thanks - this should be a lot of fun. It's been ages since I've attempted to play a video game."

"Danny picked the Tomb Raider out, I think he's secretly in love with Lara Croft. I got the Q-Bert; I remember the silly little guy from the arcade game." Suz giggled.

Samantha handed the presents to Sonny to put back on the table as she went to give her friends a 'thank you' hug and kiss.

"This has been the best birthday party ever," she confessed to the entire group.

By the time Samantha was finished opening her gifts, the caterers were pretty much finished cleaning up the food tables, and they left Aurora with a large selection of leftovers.

Kelley made the announcement that the bar was open for after dinner drinks and that there was still plenty of cake for anyone harboring a sweet tooth.

Sally walked over to her sister, hoping to get a few more minutes alone with her. Ray and Sonny would be driving her back to the airport in the morning. The marvelous weekend was coming to an abrupt end, and she was not looking forward to saying goodbye. "Hey, wanna show me around your Goddesses?" she asked her sister.

"I'd love to, it looks like Alex is going to be busy helping Kelley." She took her Sally's arm and starting walking toward the closest statue. "Aren't these great? This place really looks like Mt. Olympus."

"If you have an imagination," the younger woman giggled. "Somehow I didn't get the impression when you were reading me all those myths at bedtime that Olympus was paved in red brick."

"Smart ass! So . . . you listened when I read you those stories?"

"Did I have any choice?" Receiving a sisterly punch in the arm she feigned being hurt; her eyes twinkled when she looked at her sister and her heart was filled with happiness for Samantha's good fortune.

Samantha brought Sally out of her thoughts as they approached Artemis. "Ah, Artemis protector of her chosen people the Amazons, daughter of Zeus and Leto and sister to Apollo. Talk about a strong woman figure. And over there is Athena . . ."

"Isn't she the one who popped out of Zeus' head full grown?" Sally asked.

"Good memory! Yes, that was Athena, and she was fully armed I might add. She was the Goddess of Wisdom and War and known to be more successful at the element of war than her brother, Ares, was in the same position. The Parthenon was constructed to honor her.

She turned her sister around and pointed across the room. "Want a complete opposite? Look over there . . . that's Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. I have to admit I always thought she was neglecting me when I was in high school and college; I guess she was just saving the best for last."

Samantha looked over at Alex and then smiled at her sister. "I hope she has similar plans for you, Sal."

"I do, too," the younger woman agreed. "So who is that statute over there with the long flowing gown?"

"That's one of the Fates - Clotho. Remember there were the three sisters of Zeus and Themis? Clotho spun the thread of human life with her distaff. The middle sister, Lachesis, measured it and the older sister, Atropos, was the one who cut the thread. They were really rather powerful when you stop to think about it, holding the balance of life and death within their grasp."

"Okay, do we have a happier statue to look at?"

"Sure, this one over here," Samantha headed Sally over toward the bar area. "This is the Muse Calliope - Alex chose her because she was the Muse who helped writers, bards if you remember?"

"Oh, but I do, Sammie. Do you know how many times you told me you were going to grow up and be a bard?"

"I guess quite a few from the intonation in your voice." The blonde laughed as she put her arm around her sister's waist. "Let me show you the last mock marble visitor we have here tonight. This is Nyx. She's an unusual choice but an interesting one. Maybe Alex had a hand in picking her as well, because I told her I have really unusual dreams. Nyx is the Goddess of the night, my favorite time of the day. She was the mother of Hypnos, the God of Sleep, who was the father of Morphéus, the God of Dreams. Nyx was a rather interesting Goddess, lots of offspring. In fact there is a slight discrepancy where Nyx is said to be the one who bore the Fates instead of Themis. She was also the mother of Death, Thanatos." Looking around she made sure that she accounted for all the statues. "So, enough of the Greek mythology lesson?"

"Yeah. Do you think we might try a little of that Greek brandy? That sounded enticing."

"Let's go."

"Samantha."

"What Sally?"

"I just want you to know that I'm proud to be your sister and that this has been a great weekend."

The older Riley turned and hugged her sibling. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she began thinking of Sally going home. "I'm glad we got to spend some special time together Sally. We've got to do this more often. Talking on the phone is great, but this . . ."

"Hey, you two," the soft contralto was unmistakable as Alex walked over and put her arms around the two women standing by the statue of Nyx holding each other. "It's not time to say good bye yet; why the waterworks?"

"Anticipation." Samantha answered.

"You can just stop that right now. This is not going to be a yearly-type meeting. We'll see each other so much, you'll start getting on each other's nerves like you used to when you were small."

Alex's statement surely brought laughter to replace the tears as each of the sisters received a different mental image of days gone by. Samantha conjured up a scene of trying to leave the house to go somewhere without Sally wanting to tag along, and Sally one of her older sister threatening to tell on her if she didn't behave while being baby-sat.

"Actually we were on our way over to you for a taste of that Greek brandy."

"Then let's get back over there before Danny and Sonny have it all downed." A beautiful smile warmed Samantha's heart as she looked up at her lover and thought back over the past few days.

Suz, who wanted to know if Samantha was going to read some of the horoscope/numerology reports, greeted them when they reached the bar.

"Sure, why not? Why don't we take the brandy and go sit over there?" She pointed to the banquet table that was now conspicuously empty, save for the remainder of the cake. The four women gathered up chairs from around the area while Samantha retrieved the two cylinders containing the 'scrolls'.

Sitting down and beginning to unroll the parchment, Samantha began to read first from the astrology reports.

"This is too weird; we're both on cusps. I didn't realize that before. I'm on the Virgo/Libra cusp and Alex is on the Aquarius/Pisces. Hey girl," she nudged Alex who was sitting on one side of her, "looks like you are a fish In water! And the damn thing has you pegged beautifully! It says you are a humanitarian, philanthropist, and visionary. Nothing but good stuff to say about you Alex . . . multitalented, unique, rebellious, and a bit of a dreamer." She grinned at the last statement. "Looks like I'm not the only one in the family with a love for fantasy."

"So, read some of your good points, Ms Smarty-pants." The raven-haired beauty was enjoying this.

"Okay . . . I'm a balance creator, excellent arbitrator, perfectionist, and debater. I'm happiest when in a relationship."

"Well, that's a plus for me," Alex conceded.

At the urging of the little group Samantha continued to read on through the astrology reports and then turned to the larger numerology horoscopes.

"These are really detailed; you don't want me to go through the complete reports, do you?"

"You could just speed read and give us the juicy details," Suz suggested.

"Tell you what. I'll go get the bottle and refill everyone's drinks while Samantha is reading." Alex volunteered.

"Wow, these are divided up into categories: life path, birth date, abilities/attitudes, drives, peaks, and challenges." Then she yelled over to Sonny, "Sonny these numerology charts are so detailed."

And he yelled back, "Yes they are, aren't they Sweetness. And so true!!"

"I haven't gotten that far yet."

She turned back to the pages in her hands.

"I'll start with Alex's but will only go as far as age 32 and try to put it all into one paragraph." Quickly speed reading through the chart, she would stop at sentences that seemed to be the most important.

"Basically you are trustworthy, practical and down-to-earth." Laughing she continued on to the next page. "It says you're a little stubborn once you've made a decision." Samantha looked up into deep blue eyes that were trying hard to look disapproving and stubborn, but not at all succeeding. The blonde smiled and continued reading, "The chart describes you accurately here, Alex. It says you get very close to but a few good friends, and that with the people you love or have taken under your wing, you are extremely dependable." Again she glanced up. "Uh, oh we have a down side - you may lack tact when people get under your skin." Unable to contain a giggle, she remarked, "So far sounds pretty much like you."

"Yeah, whatever," came the response from her lover. "Go on, let's get this over with."

Samantha continued. "You assume a great deal of responsibility and have outstanding administrative capabilities; no arguing with that one. Let's see . . . ah . . . goal-oriented and self-confident. Yep, this has you pegged, Alex. You are intuitive and generally enjoy life to its fullest."

"My, my, what a charmed life you lead, my darling," Samantha smiled. "Your pinnacles include a heap of responsibilities, but the chart forgot to include that you bring them all upon yourself." Grinning, she continued reading. "You're apt to be involved in service work. I would call AP a service center that's for certain. Ah ha - the chart denotes ill-advised marriages at an early age. See, you should have waited around for me."

"Don't you think it was better that I got all the bad stuff out Before I met you?"

"When you put it that way . . . yes, and now that you've worked all the kinks out, our relationship should be smooth sailing." Samantha reached over and gave Alex a peck on the cheek, whispering in her ear, "I for one intend to see that it sails smoothly."

Turning back to the papers she continued, "Okay . . . last subject . . . challenges . . . it says from ages 0-32 to plan for slow growth rather than immediate gain, and a quick look beyond says you have a talent for speaking. Well now, isn't yours the charmed existence." Samantha handed Alex the chart and let her thumb through it.

"That is so interesting; let's see if Samantha's is as accurate," Sally encouraged.

"Alex you want to read this time?"

"No, you're doing a great job, I'll just sit back and listen with everyone else."

"Okay, but remember I didn't do the writing, I'm only reading. If it's better than yours . . ."

"What could be better than mine? I'm responsible, talented, capable . . ."

"I think we all get the picture." Samantha chuckled as she picked up the numerology horoscope with her own name on it and again started skimming through the pages, stopping at the more interesting aspects. "

"Here we go kiddies. Right off the bat I get told that creativity is my lesson for this lifetime and that normally a truly gifted person with this numerical life path is most exceptional in the realm of the verbal, namely writing. This path stresses harmony, pleasure and sharing of my talents with the world." Turning to her friend Suz she commented, "See, I told you I was going to be famous."

"Ah Sammie I don't think I heard the word famous come off those pages onto your lips," her sister grinned, impish green eyes sparkling in her sister's direction. "Did anyone else hear famous?"

"Let her dream, Sally." Alex insisted, winking in the direction of her sister-in-law. "It isn't good for creative talent to be squelched. Go on Samantha."

"Okay, I'm sorry if my abilities are making any of you less worthies nervous," the blonde smiled before continuing. "It says here on this page," she pointed before reading, "that I am open-hearted and bounce back quickly. All right on to my birth date. It states here that I'm emotional . . ."

"Understatement," muttered Sonny coming up from behind to join the little group. "Go on, Sweetness, continue."

"Yeah . . ." She looked up at him and smiled. "Oops . . . says I can be moody. Now where did that come from?"

"Gotta take the real with the elaborated," her friend kidded as he gave her a quick hug. "Moody can be good . . ."

"You're only saying that because you're the Queen of Mood," his lover interjected, also joining the group with Danny by his side.

"Great, now everyone is here to hear my faults." Samantha glanced around at all her friends smiling. "Let me see then . . . my soul urge says that my life's desire is personal expression and that I enjoy life to the fullest. It goes on to say I want to be . . . you don't need to hear all this."

"Come on Sammie, spit it out . . . I think I remember this part . . . is it about limelight?"

"Yes, cheater - no fair - it stated that I like to be in the limelight, but what artistic talent wouldn't? Anyway it says my energy is very positive and that I am rarely discouraged with a good mental and emotional balance."

"Don't you think it's getting a little deep in here?" Sonny jumped up lifting one foot then the other until Ray gave him a friendly push back into his seat.

"Behave if you want to stay up with the adults," the dark-haired man laughingly reprimanded his life partner.

"He won't have to behave much longer we only have pinnacles and challenges left, and I'm only reading up to age 33, that gives me plenty of years to account for. Let me see, my number is 11 and it says here that it's the first of the master numbers, and that makes me something of a philosopher . . . "

"Like Norman Vincent Peal?" Sonny could just not keep his mouth shut.

"Okay, someone relieve him of his glass; I think the Metaxa has pickled his brain," Alex joked.

"Do you people want to hear the rest of this or not?" Emerald eyes twinkled as she looked around the little gathering. When no one answered, she continued. "Final analysis is that I'm very sensitive and can be easily hurt or offended . . . I'm probably too sensitive for the likes of this ensemble." She grinned through the group mumblings of 'yeah right, now I've heard everything.'

"Last subject, quiet down, let me finish. Challenges in my life." She read down the final page and put the chart down. "Doesn't look like I have any challenges."

"I can't believe that," Alex stated as she picked up the papers and flipped to the last page. "Well, lookie here, Ms Samantha . . . I do believe it says you might have a tendency to become a chronic critic and complainer and that you bury your feelings under a sense of false pride. Seems like you have a little work to accomplish in this lifetime after all." She put the papers back down on the table.

"And that my friends," Samantha concluded, "is the dissection of our lives as seen by the numerologist." Looking over at her male friends she added, "Thank you, guys; that was really entertaining."

"Entertaining, is that all you think it was? That was significantly divinatory of what you can expect . . ."



"Yeah, whatever, Sonny. It was interesting and fun." To change the subject Alex offered him another drink.

"Sure." He answered, holding out his glass for her to fill.

"That's the last of the evening, Sonny." Ray whispered as his lover ignored him. "You're beginning to sound like you're feeling your liquor."

Sonny shot him a sideways glance and without missing a beat continued listening to the conversation.

"I think they were fairly accurate for the traits we already know," Samantha chimed in. "Especially the talent part."

"Egotist," Sally added with a smile.

"Why did yours seem so much longer, Samantha?" Suzanne asked, grinning.

"Probably because no one would let me get through it without comments. You want me to go back over Alex's? I can, I tried to pick out the most important stuff."

"I think we've all had enough of a good thing. I don't want to be analyzed anymore tonight." Alex entered into the conversation, refilling the glasses that were empty and sitting back down next to Samantha.

"Where did the Moms go?" Samantha asked. "Did anyone see them leave?"

"I think they left just about the time you started reading the horoscopes." Ray answered.

"Oh, that boring, huh?" Samantha giggled.

"Maybe it's just us they're bored with," Danny added.

"I think they wanted to take a leisurely swim before the tribe decided to join them," Kelley's jovial voice interrupted the contemplation of the guests. "Is anyone here sober enough to join us?" Coming through the arch in her swimsuit, she walked over to the bar and refilled her and Aurora's glasses.

Consensus was affirmative from those of the guests who were spending the night, but Marcy and Von begged off. Alex told the rest of the group to go change while she and Samantha walked the departing guests to their car.

Within less than a minute the entire courtyard was empty, save for the owner of the house. The older woman smiled after the small group as they stampeded out like a bunch of excited children. After filling the glasses, she started back toward the swimming area. It was true; she needn't have come all this way simply for drinks. She wanted to check on the progress of the party and to see

if any of the 'kids' wanted to go for one last swim before the end of the fabulous weekend. *Aurora's right, it's nice to hear this walls chime with the sounds of laughter again. It's been far too long since we've opened the Villa and we need to do this sort of celebration much more often than we have been doing.*

Not long after Kelley made her way back to the pool, the patio was filled with the laughter of the other weekend occupants of the home, save for Alex and Sam who were still out saying goodbye to Marcy and Von.

When the two finally did come back with their suits on, they went directly to Aurora.

"Mom, before I forget, Marcy said to give you her thanks for the hospitality."

"I'm sure she knows she's welcome here anytime, Alex. Marcy was always one of my favorites of your friends." Turning to the blonde hanging on her daughter's arm, Aurora put out her arms for a hug. "I want you to know how happy and proud you made me tonight, Samantha." Aurora glowed with pride as the younger woman received her hug.

"I felt right saying it," Samantha confessed. I've never called anyone but my own mother, Mom, but I feel so at home here and such a part of the family."

"That you are, Samantha, that you are." Releasing her daughter-in-law Aurora scooted them back to their friends. "You best go swim before it gets too late." She looked down at her watch, "Hey, it's almost the witching hour. Looks like everyone is going to be up to wish you a real Happy Birthday."

"Keep an eye on the time and tell us when it's official, will you Mom?" Alex asked.

"Sure." Aurora promised. "You two go swim; have fun."

Before getting in the pool Alex talked a while with Ray and Sonny about how the business was going, giving them a few pointers to increase membership. It also gave them a reason to feel legitimate about calling this a 'business trip'.

Samantha made sure to make the rounds and talk to Suz and Danny for a while. Sally kept close beside her sister; she was already beginning to feel the anxiety of separation again.

Samantha was a little concerned about Danny having too much to drink and didn't know if he was capable of driving safely all the way back up to Laguna. Suz put her mind at ease - they decided not to leave until after breakfast in the morning. The statement received a very large sigh of relief from one small blonde.

Both Sam and Alex were still dry when the clock struck midnight and Aurora announced that Samantha was officially 27.

A small war cry went up from one end of the patio as Sonny and Ray simultaneously raced in the direction of the small blonde. "Happy Birthday, Samantha!" Sonny cheered as the two men picked her up and hurled her into the deep end of the pool. "No better way than to ring in a new birth year than to be soaking wet, California style."

Samantha came up smiling and encouraged everyone to 'come on in the water's great'. Not needing another invitation the pool filled with the remaining younger people while Kelley and Aurora sat on the sidelines watching the fun.

Thirty minutes went by before Kelley walked over to the side of the pool and motioned to her daughter. Alex swam over and stood at the inside edge of the pool, an inquisitive look furrowing her eyebrows.

"Something wrong, Kelley?"

"No Alex, nothing's wrong. I hate to be a party pooper, but with all that's happening tomorrow, don't you think it would be wise to get a good night's sleep."

With an almost disgusted look the younger woman agreed. "I suppose you're right. It's going to be a little difficult convincing Samantha it's bedtime when she's still having so much fun."

"Want me to be the meanie? I don't mind."

"No, I'm a big girl; they're my friends." Swimming back to the center of the pool she nonchalantly told each person about calling it quits. Everyone but Samantha knew the schedule for later on in the morning and agreed with Kelley that Alex definitely needed a good night's sleep. The only one who was going to be difficult to convince would be the birthday girl herself. The pool was easily evacuated, and soon the only people left were Alex, Sally, and Sam.

Alex swam over toward the two sisters and grabbed her lover around the waist. Nibbling affectionately on her neck she whispered that she thought maybe it was time to call it an evening.

"Oh Alex," Samantha half whimpered, half whined, "I'm really not all that tired. Sally's going to be leaving in the morning."

"Would it make it easier if I told you we were all going out to breakfast and that you and I were going to follow them down to the airport and personally see them all off?"

"Really Alex, we could do that? Oh, yes. That would make it nice . . . but still it's early. Is everyone else really that tired?"

"I think they are, Honey. It's been a very busy day." She gripped the small blonde closer and winked at Sally across Samantha's shoulder.

"Actually Sammie, I'm exhausted." Sally yawned. "If we get a little sleep maybe we'll wake up early enough to chit-chat a little more."

"Tell you what," Alex suggested, "if you two behave and go to bed like good little sisters, I'll see to it that you get to ride together on the way to the airport."

"Alex that would be great. How?"

"Duh?" Alex chided. "Ray will ride with me and you three 'girls' can all ride down together."

The sisters laughed at the reference but agreed that it sounded like a fair trade off.

Again, en masse, the group said their goodnights to the hostesses as they left the pool area and trotted off back down to their respective suites or rooms.

Sonny asked if the cake was already boxed and put away, and Ray immediately countered the question with . . . "You don't need anything else to eat tonight."

Each couple was bid good evening as their doors were reached leaving the three musketeers, Sally, Alex, and Samantha the last people in the hallway. The duo dropped Sally off, with another almost tear filled goodnight from the sisters.

"Come on, you two, it's already morning - let's get a couple hours sleep."

"Good night, Alex. Thanks for the marvelous day."

"You're welcome, Sally. See you in a bit."

The dark beauty put her arm around Samantha's shoulders and the two walked silently back to their suite. Once inside Samantha suggested a nice warm Jacuzzi.

"Over here, Birthday Girl." Alex patted the bed as she sat on the edge. Sam walked right in between her lover's legs, throwing her arms around Alex's neck.

"Do you realize just how special you've made my birthday?"

"I hope I do. But I have a little something here I didn't give you at the party, not worth wrapping."

Samantha frowned; she couldn't imagine anything she hadn't already gotten.

Alex reached under the pillow and came up with two more games for the PlayStation. She laughed as she handed them to Samantha. "Here, I knew you were getting Tomb Raider I so I figured if you liked it you might as well have II and III to go along with it. I threw in the Final Fantasy for a little imagination.

"Oh Alex. Thank you. I can't wait to get home and play. Maybe we can set it up here tomorrow and play sometime when we were just sitting around resting."

Sapphire eyes danced to a music her lover could not hear in anticipation of the final birthday surprise, but Alex answered in a solemn tone, "We'll see how busy we get. If we have time, sure."

She drew Samantha in close and nuzzled her head into the soft chest in front of her. "Honey, would you mind terribly if we skipped the Jacuzzi and just took a quick shower. I don't know why but I think the day just caught up with me. I'm exhausted."

She watched a slight look of chagrin fan across the fair face she loved but knew she couldn't risk not having enough sleep tonight. *Your disappointment will be short lived, my love, I promise.* "I know it's officially your birthday and if you insist . . ."

"No Alex, you're probably right; we've been going since early this morning and tomorrow will be another early day. We have the rest of the week to play around, right?"

"Right!"

"But I do want to shower and get this chlorine off me before we go to bed." Samantha headed toward the bathroom. "You coming," she coaxed.

"Right behind you, Samantha. But you have to promise to behave."

"No, it's my birthday, I don't have to promise anything today. You'll just have to come and take your chances."

Take her chances she certainly did, as small eager hands, enticed her into the warm flowing liquid. True to her unpromised word, Samantha played with the soap all over the tall, athletic body before her. Alex allowed her to continue then slowly lost the battle with her resistance and reciprocated.

"You are a tease, my Destiny."

"I'm not teasing. I want to feel you," she ran enthusiastic fingers down the long expanse of her lover's back, cupping the firm buttocks, and then continuing on between the muscular thighs. "By the Gods, I can't get enough of you."

Alex turned and faced her galaxy. She held the perfectly shaped face between her hands and gazed into the stars through sparkling verdant eyes and the sun through the smile that lit up her life. Gently she bent down and kissed the soft lips before her. "Happy birthday, my Destiny. I love you more than words can say."

"I love you, too, Alex."

Water continued to flow over, around, and between the two bodies as they stood holding on to each other. Knowing they should step out of the cascading liquid and actually moving to complete the task were two different things. Standing in the small space the two were lost in a

warp of time, knowing if they dared to move the spell would be broken. Finally Alex broke the silence, "You won't be happy if we stand here long enough to run the hot water cold."

"You're absolutely right." Samantha agreed.

The spell having been broken they got out and dried off. Alex threw Samantha a nightshirt, hoping to stay the activity that they both ached to perform, because she knew that sleep was of the essence and morning was slowly creeping up on them.

The bed was soft and inviting as Samantha fit her body next to her lover's and began exploring the muscles she knew so well. Alex slowly stilled her lover's hand and held it close to her heart, then brought it up to her lips to be kissed. "We really need to get some sleep, my love. I'm sorry to put you off, but I'm exhausted," she lied.

Samantha thought it odd that Alex would not give in to her overtures, but conceded that the day had been busy, as had the entire weekend. She snuggled closer and gave Alex a squeeze, then kissed her on the chest. "Thank you for such a wonderful weekend, Alex."

"You're welcome, Honey. Try to get some sleep, tomorrow is a busy day."

"Oh?"

"It's your birthday, right?"

"Right."

"Did you think we were going to sit around looking at each other all day?"

Alex could feel the smile forming on the face against her chest and she couldn't help but smile along with it.

"I guess I hadn't really thought about much past taking everyone to the airport," the small blonde admitted.

Again Samantha found the excitement about the coming week building, as she tried to imagine what Alex could have in store for tomorrow after everyone was gone. Maybe they were going to explore some quiet, off the beaten path area of the beach that Alex knew about, or maybe they would just spend a romantic day entirely by themselves. Thinking about what might happen tomorrow made her think less of not making love tonight, but the drawback was the surge of adrenaline that was again pumping through her veins in anticipation of the week ahead.

Alex felt the beat of her lover's heart increasing and wondered what thoughts were traveling through the pretty blonde head resting so comfortably on her chest. She would have asked but wanted Samantha to try to get some sleep. Instead she simply nuzzled her nose into the soft, fragrant tresses, kissed her gently and held her tight. *Goodnight my Destiny, Happy Birthday - Thank you for coming into my life and bringing your exuberance with you.*

Neither one, of the would be sleepers, realized how tired they actually were and neither expected to drift off into the land of dreams as quickly as they did. But Samantha's dream God Morpheus made plans for the lover's and was busy leading them off to his world as soon as their thoughts were quieted.

It seemed as though she had just kissed Samantha goodnight, when the sun, trickling through the glass, tickled her eyelids, announcing the arrival of a brilliant day. It was early and it was Samantha's birthday, but she was the one with butterflies in her stomach and anticipation running full gallop through her veins. Surprising someone else had never been such an exciting experience before, but every time she watched Samantha's face light up, her heart burst with joy and the feeling was as addicting to her as getting high would be to someone on drugs.

It was only 7:30 and Alex thought she would give the small woman in her arms another hour's sleep before awakening her. Carefully untangling from the arms she would have preferred to stay wrapped up in she slipped quietly out of the bed and tiptoed into the bathroom. A few minutes later when she opened the door to re-enter the bedroom she was greeted by a wide-eyed munchkin with sparkling green eyes and a smile that spread across her entire face.

"Excitement really does get you up in the morning doesn't it?"

"That and you sneaking out of bed in a strange place."

"Hey, I left you a pillow to curl up with."

With that Samantha picked up one of the pillows and tossed it in the direction of the sarcastic remark.

Having caught it, Alex hopped back on the bed, fingers ready to tickle the already laughing Samantha. "Tickle or . . ."

"Definitely the 'or'," Samantha answered before the question was completely formulated. Grabbing two strong shoulders she let herself fall back onto the bed, pulling Alex with her. "You smell good enough to eat,"

"That is not a comment to be made at a time when we have no time." Alex warned.

"Really? You think everyone is up already? Didn't you say we were going out for breakfast?"

"Yes." Alex looked quizzically at her lover. "So?"

"If we don't have to fix breakfast and if we're the only people up. I could have another birthday present and it wouldn't cost you a penny."

"And just what would that be, pray tell?"

"You."

"Oh, I think I get the picture," soft dark tresses tickled Samantha's stomach as Alex shifted to Samantha's side, lifted the blonde's nightshirt, and began spreading butterfly kisses across the firm abdomen.

"I said I could have you, Alex." Samantha giggled, raising her lover's head to looking into enchanting blue eyes.

"That's exactly what you are having, Samantha - me!" She continued undressing the small body at her fingertips, first running her fingers down Sam's stomach, then under her panties, playing hide-and-seek through the golden curls below and teasingly touching areas that needed more than a gentle caress.

"But Alex, I . . . oooo . . . "

"You were saying Samantha?"

Incomprehensible utterances escaped from between clenched teeth, and broken breaths could be heard, as adroit fingers stripped the panties loose and threw them on the floor. Alex covered the Samantha's body with her own and dark curls mingling playfully with gold. Samantha's legs wound themselves around her lover's waist, lifting her body to meet Alex's as they danced to music only the two of them could hear.

Alex kissed closed eyes, soft cheeks, and lips on her way to breasts with nipples standing alert, so as not to be missed by the dark-haired beauty on her journey south. Alex paused in her movement when her breasts reached the area of the flaxen mound, and one at a time she allowed them to press gently against the nether lips below, causing Samantha to also stop for a second and hold her breath each time she felt the stimulating pressure.

"Happy birthday, Samantha," Alex whispered, her tongue circling, then dipping into Samantha's navel. Her long arms reached down shapely legs and starting from the ankle up barely touched each leg, smiling as bumps involuntarily covered the entire area of Samantha's body.

Again the moans of pleasure that had no voice reached Alex's ears. The emotions were communicated nonverbally, yet beyond a doubt it was known that the receiver was in the throes of ecstasy at every touch.

"Breakfast is served," Alex mumbled resituating herself. Taking Samantha's buttocks, one in each hand, she lifted Samantha to meet her mouth and drank in the moistness between the golden folds. "Juice of the Goddess," she smiled as her tongue licked the excess from the edges of the nether lips and then flicked quickly at the small bud that stood swollen and ready.

"Alex . . . " escaped the small woman's throat, and "Alex . . . " again.

"What do you want, my Destiny?" The question was abstract as the inquisitor expected no answer but continued her morning seduction. Constantly playful, her tongue began flicking quickly and more urgently as the seconds disappeared into minutes. She could feel Samantha's



necessity a breath before the final outer quake, and immediately after Alex expertly took the plunge to deep within her lover's pleasure. Once there she rode with Samantha to their final destination of orgasmic double fantasy as fireworks exploded in their bodies and rapture bound the two of them together as one.

Lying afterward, holding the other half of her soul in her arms, breathing in the fragrant bouquet of love and still tasting the sweetness of Samantha on her lips, she knew they couldn't linger in the bed much longer.

The clock was glaring at her, shouting that it was already 8:15, and they needed to be out of the house by 10:00 if they were to have a leisurely breakfast and get to the airport on time. She talked with Esmerelda on Friday about coming into the suite, while they were all having tea and coffee this morning and putting everything that was laying out into the suitcases, then having Jorge help her put them in the trunk of the Porsche. She knew that Samantha had been a little leery as to why she didn't want her to unpack, but she tried to keep the small blonde busy enough throughout the weekend to cause her to forget asking about unpacking again.

"I hate to be the one to say this . . ." Alex broke the blissful silence, "because I would like nothing better than to spend the rest of the day right here . . . but we have to get up, my Destiny."

"That's the problem with 'morning delight'," Samantha smiled, cuddling closer to Alex. "The rest of the day too quickly interferes. But, I know you're right. I need a shower, want to join me?"

"Sure, but it really has to be a quick one Samantha - I want to make sure everyone is up in time for us to have a unhurried breakfast."

"What time do we have to be at the airport? I thought Sally said something about 2 o'clock?"

"We should actually be there by 1:30, I think one of the planes takes off at 2:30 and they want you there an hour early." She followed the blonde into the shower and more than once grabbed small hands to prevent them from roaming into places that were not at all conducive to getting in and out of the water quickly.

With a little perseverance the duo was dressed and out of the suite by a little before 9:00. Unlike the other mornings, no one got a timid knock today. Each door received a loud rapping until the occupant/occupants answered in resounding vocals. Alex announced boisterously that everyone had exactly until 10:00 to be in the kitchen area or they would be left behind, that included having their luggage ready.

Mumbles, grumbles and a few normal 'good mornings' echoed through the hall and the tall dark woman smiled, draping an arm around Samantha's shoulders as they exited the hall on the way to the other end of the Villa.

Kelley, Aurora and Esmerelda were in the nook area talking when Alex and Sam appeared.

"So, how's the birthday girl?" Aurora greeted the blonde.

"Very rested and ready for a new day. I want to thank you both for a wonderful weekend, it was unbelievable everything we fit into a few short days. It made my birthday one I will never forget."

"You welcome Samantha," Kelley responded. "We enjoyed having the little troupe here, reminded us of what we're missing. We intend to do things like this a little more often. Life's too short not to."

Alex walked over into the kitchen and Esmerelda followed where they stood talking.

"I hope you don't mind if we beg off going to breakfast with all of you this morning," Aurora commented. "I have some work that needs looking into and Kelley has some clients to call back."

"No, I thoroughly understand. We'll touch base with you later in the day, I'm sure. Right Alex?" She looked around to find Alex over in the kitchen talking to Esmerelda.

"That's right Samantha," Alex quickly agreed then smiled and mumbled to Esmerelda, "Whatever it was she said."

The two of them chuckled quietly before the older woman took off seemingly to go about her daily chores.

With two cups of tea in hand, Alex walked back over to the nook and handed Samantha one, taking a seat beside her at the table. "What would you like to do after we drop everyone off at the airport? Anything special you have in mind?"

"Not really, I guess I wasn't thinking much with everyone taking off . . ."

"And leaving you alone with me?" Alex smiled.

"I didn't mean it that way." Samantha gave her lover a pat on the shoulder. "I love being alone with you. It's just . . ."

"I'm kidding with you Samantha." Alex shook her head and took a sip of tea.

"Did you get everyone up on your way here?" Kelley asked looking at her daughter.

"Yes, banged on all their doors, anyone not visible in about a half-hour will get a private invitation to join the rest of us." She smiled over at Kelley. "So, Mom's letting you go back to work today?"

"Yeah, not much she can do about it; there's a big shopping mall contract pending that needs some looking over. I've been distancing myself lately; trying to let the younger ones get their feet wet alone. Your Mom wants to do some traveling this year so . . ."

"So, you've got to stop working so much, I get it."

Samantha was walking out onto the patio, so Alex excused herself and followed.

"Something wrong, Honey, you look pensive?"

Samantha put her cup down on a nearby table, turned to face the dark-haired beauty, and threw her arms around Alex's waist, burying her head in the taller woman's chest. "I don't want to put a damper on today . . ."

"I should hope not, it's your birthday."

"It's just that I'm going to miss Sally when she goes, and I feel so helpless about what she's going home to."

Comforting words reached Samantha's ears as Alex explained that they would do everything in their power to help alleviate the pain of the situation once Sally got home and talked to Sheila and once they got back to Laguna. Lifting a salty drop from Samantha's cheek Alex gently chided her about tears eroding the mood of festivity. "Today is a day of celebration, let's treat it as such, shall we?"

"Yes," Samantha agreed. "I'm just being over sensitive."

"Uh, oh . . . not now Samantha," Alex kidded her. "We're on vacation, remember?"

"It's not PMS." The sparkle returning to the emerald eyes was no longer being caused by glistening tears as a smile lit up Alex's heart.

"Let's go see what's keeping everyone, shall we?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to get hungry." Samantha admitted.

"What an unusual happening. How about a piece of leftover baklava to tied you over?"

"Better yet, how about a piece of that birthday cake?"

"Your wish is my command today," Alex deposited Samantha back at the table with Kelley while she went and cut them both a slice of cake. "Nothing like a sugar rush first thing in the morning to get the glucose levels fluctuating."

Just as she was about to sit down some stragglers came wandering into the room.

"Happy Birthday," Sonny exclaimed, seeing the blonde sitting at the table. "Whatcha eating? I thought we were going out to breakfast?" He kissed her on the cheek while taking the fork from her and sampling the cake. "A little cake never put too much damper on a good appetite now did it."

"My sentiments exactly," Samantha answered as she took the fork back and put the last piece of cake into her mouth. "I know I'm still hungry enough for pancakes and eggs."

"We knocked on Sally's door and got an 'I'll be right there' from her. And I heard commotion in Suz and Danny's room as well." Ray told the people at the table.

No sooner than the words were spoken than the remaining characters all materialized as if they knew they were being talked about.

"Where are we going for breakfast?" Danny wanted to know.

"Somewhere between here and San Diego. Since you need to check in down at the base anyway, it will put all of us that much closer to our destinations.

Suz went over to officially wish Samantha a Happy Birthday. "I'm glad you two decided to stay last night," the blonde confided to her friend.

"There wasn't a lot of choice," Suz confessed. "Danny was really feeling his Metaxa and I didn't feel like driving. Besides, I can call in for my transcription anytime today and he already called and switched his duty station with someone else. I'll drop him off down at the base and then drive on home."

"But that means you'll have to make the trip alone."

"It's not that long of a drive, Samantha, but we've been talking about my moving down closer to the base, so we can see each other more often. If we're going to get married we might as well try out the living arrangements and stop with being only weekend lovers."

"That's great news for you Suz. The down side is that we won't get to see you as much if you do that."

"Sam, I haven't seen that much of you since you and Alex got together anyway," her friend smiled, patting her on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't be, Hon, that's love!"

Alex was busy making sure everyone had help getting their luggage into their respective cars. "Jorge can help you with that if you need help, Ray," she called over to her friend as she saw him struggling with two suitcases. Then she laughed, "Or perhaps, Sonny could help."

"Bite your tongue, girlfriend," came the taunting reply from across the room near Samantha and Suz.

"That's okay, I think Jorge's helping Esmerelda." Ray countered.

By 10 o'clock all the cars were loaded. The departing guests were saying a final farewell and 'thank you' to the gracious hostesses, who invited everyone back to visit again.

After receiving directions to a little out-of-the-way restaurant just outside of San Diego proper, everyone got into their respective cars and the small convoy took off.

Within 20 minutes they were seated and ready to order. Alex informed the hostess of the celebration and when the meals arrived, Samantha received an extra pancake with the words 'happy birthday' written in whipped cream.

Too soon it was time to part with two of the guests. Suz and Danny said goodbye to new and old friends alike, ending with Samantha.

"Sam I hope the rest of your birthday week is as enjoyable as these past few days have been for us. Alex, thank you for inviting us and for everything you've done. Sam's a lucky girl," Suz turned back to Samantha and gave her friend a hug.

"You're more than welcome; the weekend was a huge success because everyone who was invited came." Alex opened the car door for Suz and shut it after she got in.

"Thanks again for coming down, and have a safe trip home. As for the rest of this week, I'm sure I'll be having a marvelous time, after all Alex is doing the planning." Samantha put her arm around Alex's waist and gave her a hug, then waved to their friends as they drove off.

"Time to get this little caravan moving toward the airport. You 'girls' drive safely now, pay attention to the road and not just to the gossip, Sonny." Alex instructed as she saw to it that everyone was in the vehicle safely. "Follow us, we'll park my car in the lot and then take yours up to the rental place."

"Okay, see you at the airport." Sonny called out as Alex went back to the Boxster.

Traffic was rather light and the ride was short. The two sisters sat in the back seat next to each other, neither one saying a word.

"The object of the three of us riding together was that we talk. No one is talking. Come on girls, I know you're not happy about being separated again, but don't waste these last few minutes of your visit in silence," Sonny lectured.

"He's absolutely right. Sammie, this trip has been so good for me. I needed to get away for a while and this was perfect. Thanks for being born today." Sally grinned and hugged her sister. "So I don't forget to tell you, meeting you and Ray was fantastic, Sonny. I hope to get to see the two of you again sometime."

"Sure you will, Sally, we'll make sure of it. Sometime when the girls come up to visit us, you can hop on a plane and come down and meet up with all of us."

"That would be a lot of fun. Thanks for the invitation, Sonny." Sally leaned over the front seat and gave the gentle man a kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad you're my sister's friend, Sonny, she needs friends like you."

"Oh, she most definitely has me, and I think she's something special."

"Enough about me," Samantha piped in. "Seriously Sonny, inviting Sally down to San Francisco is a super idea, that way we all kind of meet in the middle. But, first we have a couple family problems to put to rest and then we can start some plans for all of us meeting at your place." She took her sister's hand in her own and squeezed it. "Don't forget the talk with Mom."

"I won't Sammie."

"We'll be home next Monday. Let me know what's happening. Actually I would sleep better if you would call me when you get home tonight so I know everything's okay."

"No problem, Sam."

"That goes for you and Ray as well, Mr. Man."

"You got it, Girlfriend!" Sonny smiled into the rear view mirror back at his friend.

As they started to pull into the airport area two sets of almost identical verdant eyes began misting over, each looking out a window in opposite directions.

Sonny looked back sensing the sorrow that seemed to fill the air like a heavy odor. There were no words to lift the ache of leaving from the sister's hearts, but as usual, Sonny tried.

"Hey you two tell me something, when it says on a can of cat food -new and improved -who does the testing?"

In unison the two sisters turned their heads toward the front seat and groaned.

"That is sooo old, Sonny." Samantha wailed.

"Might be, but it got the two of you to turn around with a smile on your pretty little faces."

They made a right turn as Alex pulled into a long driveway.

"Looks like we're at the first destination." Sonny followed the Porsche, which turned at the second left and then another right before coming to a stop in front of a small building. She motioned for him to pull in beside her.

Samantha looked around and could see that the airport proper was still not all that close. "I wonder why Alex is parking so far from the airport?"

"Maybe she figures there wouldn't be any spaces up around the arriving/departing zones. They have a shuttle that brings people back here to get their cars."

"Maybe so."

Ray and Alex got out of the Boxster and Alex came around to open Samantha's door. "Did you 'girls' have a nice visit?"

"Yes, thanks for suggesting we ride together." Samantha took Alex's hand as the taller woman helped her out of the car. "Why did you park the car in lot so far from the airport?"

"You'll see in a minute." She looked over the car at Sally who was already out. "So did you two have a nice reunion this weekend?"

"Alex, it was more than nice, it was marvelous. I had such a good time going to all the new places and catching up with Sam. I don't know how to properly thank you and your folks." Sally's voice cracked a little as she spoke, unable to tell her sister-in-law just how much the weekend meant to her.

By this time Sally was standing in front of the couple, "You just thanked us, Sally." Alex bent down and kissed her on the cheek. "Mi casa es su casa."

A small man with chestnut colored hair came out of the building and was approaching the small group, arm outstretched and a huge smile on his face. "Ms Dorian, so good to see you again. Everything is ready for your take off in about 45 minutes. So, is this the lucky lady traveling with you?" He looked around and then back at Alex. "Luggage?"

"In the trunk." She handed the keys to Ray who opened the trunk of the Porsche and placed the luggage on the ground.

"Yes, Andrew." Alex smiled and offered her hand then turned to Samantha. "This is Samantha."

"Hi." The response was almost meek and sounded in part like a question. Samantha looked from the man, to the luggage that she noticed was theirs, and back up to Alex. With a questioning look on her face her eyes met those of sparkling sapphire.

"What?" Alex grinned at her lover.

"Something going on, I don't know about, Alex?"

"You might say that." Putting an arm around the small woman's shoulders, the dark beauty turned Samantha in the direction of a small plane sitting alone out on the tarmac. "I thought maybe a little trip to Sedona would be a lot more fun than sitting around the Villa for a week. Think you might enjoy that?"

Samantha could hardly believe her ears. She looked from Alex, to the plane, to each of the individuals standing around with Cheshire grins on their faces.

"You ALL knew about this?!"

Affirmative nods came from all directions. "Happy Birthday, Samantha," greeted her ears in unison.

Samantha looked over at the plane and back at Alex. "So we're going to be there for a week?"

"Yes. Happy Birthday to you, my Destiny." With a bit of sorrow in her voice Alex continued, "Unfortunately, Honey, it's time to say goodbye to these three."

"Damn, in all the excitement I almost forgot the reason we were coming to the airport." Samantha walked over to Ray and gave him a big hug and kiss.

"Thanks for coming down, it wouldn't have been the same without you."

"You're welcome Samantha, any excuse to see the two of you is a good one." He kissed her back and passed her on down to Sonny while he turned to say goodbye to his other friend.

Sonny reached out his arms and Samantha put her own around his waist, her head resting on his chest. "It was so good to see you again," she mumbled.

"Same here, Sweetness. But not to worry - we'll be doing this again at the end of next month."

"That's right, we're coming up for Halloween. That ought to be so much fun! You call me when you . . . but wait do you have the number where we are staying in Sedona?"

"No, but I promise I'll call Aurora and tell her we arrived and she can relay the message on to the two of you. Alex has to call home as soon as you two land so everyone will know that everyone arrived safely. You should have Sally do the same."

"Yes, I will." Tears began to fill the emerald green eyes looking up into the face of her friend.

"I know, Sweetness, it hurts to see your little Sis leave, but she'll be back to visit. She already told me she would and she promised to come to San Francisco one of the times you two are at our place visiting." He leaned over and whispered in his friend's ear, holding her close. "Don't get upset. You'll see her again real soon; I just know you will. Besides, your mascara will run."

That received the expected results when she smiled back up at him and gently gave him a hit on the arm, "You do know how to cheer a girl up, Sonny. And I don't have any mascara on." She gave him kiss and sent him off to say goodbye to Alex, while she turned and faced her sister, but not before admonishing him for being so good at keeping a secret."

He merely smiled and shooed her on toward Sally.



"I guess this is so long for a while, Sammie," Sally began as she walked into her sister's outstretched arms. "I'm so glad Alex called and asked me to come down."

"Yeah, me too! Please remember to give Aurora a call when you get home and let her know everything's okay. We'll be calling there to check in and it would be a load off my heart."

"Sure I will, Sammie. You have a marvelous vacation. Damn, your own private plane, what an experience!"

"Yeah, I've never been up in a plane like that one." She looked over at the Cessna and then back at her sister. Smiling the entire time she also reprimanded Sally for not letting on about the surprise.

"If any of us had let it slip it wouldn't have been a surprise, Samantha, and Alex would have beheaded us all. I was just glad Danny didn't get a loose tongue last night after all that Metaxa he drank." Her smile turned softer and her voice graver when she spoke again. "I just got finished telling Alex to be sure to take good care of you." She added in a lighter tone, "You're my favorite sister, ya know." Drawing Samantha into a close hug, the younger woman could feel unbidden tears filling her gentle eyes.

"I'm your only sister!" Samantha remarked, laughing, holding her sister away from her and brushing away a careless tear beginning to streak the freckled face. "I love you Sally." Sam felt a knot in her heart as her own eyes brimmed and overflowed with salty warm liquid.

"I love you, too, Samantha. I'll have a good heart-to-heart with Mom and when you two get back from Sedona, we'll talk - promise." This time it was Sally's turn to wipe away a tear.

"Have a good trip back and tell Mom I loved the album and that I love her."

"I will."

"Time to boogie," Sonny called to Sally. "We have commercial flights, and they don't wait for us . . . like some people we know." Grinning he motioned the younger woman toward him.

Regretfully relinquishing her sister's hand, Samantha watched as Sally got into the car with her two favorite guys. Alex stood by her side, an arm over her shoulder and gave her a hug. "It will all turn out fine, Samantha."

"I know, Alex. It's just that I'm going to miss her."

"That's to be expected, but we'll make sure we see her more often."

They stood there watching and waving as the car took off toward the airport.

When the car was no longer in sight, Samantha turned and faced her Princess Charming. "Oh Alex, I love you so much."

"I know, but I love you more." Alex answered smiling as she wiped the remnants of tears from her lover's face. She leaned down to give Samantha a quick kiss.

Unexpectedly the blonde's lips lingered on those of her lover, turning the peck into a passionate embrace.

Without taking her lips from Samantha's, Alex whispered, "People are watching."

"You know what, Alex?" Samantha whispered back. "I don't really care!"

Continued in Part 7...

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## Part 7

### Chapter 7

Oblivious to all that was going on around them, the two lovers stood in the driveway, lost in thought and lost in each other when they heard from behind the sound of purposeful footsteps and coughing.

Alex turned to face her crew leader.

"Sorry to interrupt, Alex, but you need to get your pre-flight check started if you want to taxi out of here on time.

"You're right, Jerome." She took the flight plan she received earlier that morning by fax to her mom's house out of her back pocket. "You did a thorough check, right?"

"As usual Alex and everything is in perfect condition." He smiled at the two women and turned, heading back toward the plane to supervise the fueling.

"You want to walk around with me while I check things out, Samantha?"

"Try and stop me," the blonde smiled grabbing the hand extended in her direction.

"Great, let's get started." She led Samantha over to the plane and motioned for her to stay by the wing while she stepped up and opened the cockpit door. "This part will just take a second," she advised the blonde.

Her ARrOW (air worthiness, registration, (radio), operations manual, weight and balance) documents were laying on her seat, as usual, and she checked to make sure everything was as it should be before sliding them back into the folder and down into the pocket behind her seat. After being seated she unlocked the yoke and turned on the master power to lower the flaps . . . 10E . . . 20E . . . 30E . . . *beacon on and working, looks like they're finished with the fueling, both engines looking good.* She turned the master power off and exited the cockpit.

"Okay, you ready for a walk around?"

Samantha nodded and followed beside the tall woman. Alex was carrying a clipboard and started checking off blocks as they walked around the plane.

"Alex would you mind reading some of that out loud? I have no idea what you're looking at or doing and it's interesting."

"Sure, Honey. I'm sorry. It becomes like second nature the things that need to be checked off. Here you hold this and follow down, when I say it's okay, just check it off."

"Okay." Samantha looked at the clipboard she had just been handed. She hadn't realized there were so many things that had to be gone over before taking off into the air. She had just assumed that Alex's crew would have taken care of everything. "Didn't your crew check this stuff for you, Alex?"

"In actuality, yes, they did. But for peace of mind, as the pilot, I need to go over all of it myself; it's like checking out your own parachute - if it doesn't open, it's no one's fault but your own."

"That makes sense."

The two women started going over the long list Samantha now held in her hand, starting with the left wing and working their way around the plane . . . wing inspection . . . empennage, including position light and rudder checks. Next they inspected the right fuselage . . . right wing (same as left - brake, tire, prop, alternator belt, wing tip, etc.). And finally the nose of the plane was inspected. With everything checked off Alex hollered over to Jerome that it looked like they were ready to board. He ran over to his employer.

"Meet inspection, Alex?"

"As usual, Jerome. Thanks for keeping her in such good shape." The tall woman held out her hand and received a firm shake from the pleasant man.

"Always my pleasure, Alex. You two have a good trip and I guess we'll see you back here on Sunday?"

"That's the plan." She turned to Samantha and helped her up the wing and into the compartment.

The cockpit was somewhat congested and Alex made sure the seats were both positioned and locked and that the safety belts were on and secured.

"Okay last checks before starting are right here . . . fuel - check, avionics - off, lights - off, and circuit breakers - in." She turned to Samantha who was watching the raven-haired beauty's proficiency in awe. "You ready to fly, Samantha?"

"Ready when you are pilot." A proud smile in the direction of her lover received one of the same in return.

Alex adjusted her kneeboard, and then placed the key into the ignition. She opened the window and yelled out to her crew, "Clear prop!" Turning the key started the left engine and she powered down to idle, then proceeded to do the same for the right engine. Next came readying the radio for communication and retracting the flaps back to 0°.

Looking over at Samantha she smiled. "Okay, let's get this party going." Alex began flipping the switches and checking all the instruments as they came online. Everything that had been off was now being flipped or turned into the on position and as she pointed the aircraft toward the runway they slowly began venturing off the tarmac to their taxi position.

With her headset on Alex began speaking into the microphone. "Lindbergh tower, this is Cessna 69698 with information LIMA, ready to taxi for take-off.

Lindbergh ATC answered: "Cessna 69698, taxi to two-seven right.

Samantha could feel the excitement racing through her body. She'd never been up in a small plane like this before and her adrenaline was pumping.

They taxied onto the runway and stopped as Alex performed the remainder of her preflight checks. When she was finished, she called the tower a second time for departure clearance.

"Lindbergh tower, this is Cessna 69698, ready for takeoff on two-seven right for northeast departure, IFR to Sedona.

Again the tower answered: "Cessna 69698, cleared for take-off on two-seven right with right turnout approved. IFR cleared."

Alex looked over at Samantha and smiled. "Ready for lift-off."

"More than ready," Samantha admitted her hands slightly tightening on the arms of her seat.

Not missing the action of her lover, Alex snickered. "You scared Samantha?"

"No! What would give you that idea?"

"Maybe the death grip you have on your seat?"

Samantha looked down and laughed. "Okay, maybe a little - this is my first time in a private plane . . ."

"You don't have to explain, Samantha. I totally understand. But I've done this plenty of times and you're safe with me, I promise."

"I have no doubt about your ability, Alex, honestly. It's just . . ."

"I know the anticipation. Well sit back and enjoy because we've got the go ahead and we're outta here."

Within minutes the small aircraft was up in the air and Samantha was waving goodbye to San Diego.

"By the Gods this is fantastic," Samantha exclaimed looking out the window. "You just don't get the same feeling looking out the small windows in the back of planes, do you?"

"No. This is an entirely different ballgame. There is a freedom of spirit you get when you're up in the air with the clouds below you and the stars a little closer than you're used to." She smiled over at the excited blonde. "Of course you can't see the stars yet, but you just know you could reach out and touch one if you wanted to."

"Alex that is so un-you!"

"Guess you bring out the poet in me." The raven-haired beauty smiled over at her destiny, her heart filled to overflowing at being able to make this day so special for the one person who made her world smile.

"How long will we be flying?"

"I figure between 45 minutes and an hour, then we'll be back down on solid ground and in Sedona."

"Wow, that's not very long."

"No, it's a rather short flight, actually."

"Alex?"

"What, Honey?"

"I was wondering why we didn't take this to San Francisco when we went."

"Actually, I guess there were a few reasons. First, Ray and Sonny wanted me up there the next day, and the plane hadn't been serviced in a while, so that would have taken time. It was their call and it was less expensive for them to fly us up than for me to take this baby up there. Secondly." A slight blush crossed Alex's cheeks and Samantha gave her a questioning look. "I didn't want you to think me ostentatious." She blushed even deeper and Samantha smiled broader, not saying a word. "You hardly knew me and if I were to say something like, 'Hey you want to take a ride in my plane?' I may have lost you right then and there."

"I doubt that very much, my love - remember - we are each other's destiny."

"How could I forget that?" Alex smiled over at her heart's desire, a hint of rose still gracing her cheeks.

"Pink is a nice color on you, Alex." Samantha smiled as she gently reached over and caressed her dark angel's face. "I love it when your body let's me know how gentle your heart really is without your mind interfering."

"Only for you, my Destiny, only for you."

The remainder of the short trip they talked about the clouds, the sky, the illusion of the size of the ground below, and how it felt to be a pilot. Alex twisted and turned the plane, allowing Samantha a look at things as she called attention to them. More than once the pilot showed off for her captive audience.

Once during the flight, Alex offered Samantha a chance to fly the plane by taking control of the yoke in front of her. The small woman was slightly intimidated at first and pulled back with too much pressure on the small semi-circular steering wheel, causing them to ascend too fast. But,

Alex quickly corrected the mistake, and Samantha tried again, using a gentler hand and found that it was not all that difficult.

Sam thought to herself how she hadn't felt this free in . . . forever . . . and that she loved being up above the clouds with the one person in the world, who could make her smile simply by being alive.

As they approached their destination the majestic formations of Arizona's red rocks came into plain view. Samantha was astonished at the simple beauty and the majestic aura the rocks created as they covered the ground below.

About 10 minutes outside of Sedona Alex began to make preparations for landing. She put her headset and mic back on and plugged into 122.8 UNICOMM frequency. Before calling the airport she checked her radio, ASOS, to make sure there were no wind or weather changes.

"Damn, I wanted to come in on runway 3. The winds are still out of the north 30 knots, but there's a strong crosswind on the runway. We're lucky that the weather is still calm, I guess that Santa Ana is holding her breath until we get back down onto the ground. Then she called in: "Sedona traffic, this is Cessna 69698, 10 miles southwest of airport, in-bound for midfield crossing at 6500', for full stop on runway 21 - Sedona traffic."

"Fairly soon you should be able to see the airport," Alex interjected to Samantha between calls to the tower. "For a little town it's really quite impressive and they have a marvelous restaurant there. It's great for watching the sunset . . ."

"That sounds like fun - a new place to watch our sunset. Could we go there one night this week Alex?"

"I don't see why not. Yeah. You got a date! We just have to figure out which night." Turning her attention back to the intercom she voiced again: "Sedona traffic, this is Cessna 69698, 5 miles southwest of airport, in-bound for midfield crossing at 6500', for full stop on runway 21 - Sedona traffic."

Turning back to her lover she explained roughly what she was doing and what was going to happen next. "We were flying most of the trip at an altitude of 9500 feet; we've now descended to 6500 feet.

Samantha began pointing out the window -- "Look, there's the airport. Oh Alex, this is so exciting."

The pilot smiled, putting another feather in her cap for new experiences, then, once again, at 2½ miles out this time, she contacted the airport with the same information. Within minutes she was crossing the midfield approximately three nautical miles past the runway as she started turning and descending to 5800' to enter her traffic pattern altitude. "Sedona traffic this is Cessna 69698, right turn for 45° downwind entry, Sedona traffic."

Crossing the end of the runway and flying parallel to it, she began her final throttle back to 1700-rpm carburetor, heat - on, throttle - back.

Samantha watched awe struck as Alex communicated, checked, flipped, and maneuvered. Sam smiled to herself while listening to Alex who seemed unaware that she was whispering to herself as she went through the landing procedures . . . "10° of flaps . . . okay - 20° of flaps.

The blonde watched as her the dark-haired pilot looked right, checking for traffic for final clear.

Then it was time for Alex to speak out loud again. "Sedona traffic this is Cessna 69698, left final, for active 21, full stop.

"Okay," she mumbled to herself as she turned. "30° flaps."

Slowly she throttled back, clearing and making the runway, keeping the centerline even with the nose of the plane. Coming in closer to the ground she continued with all power pulled out, went to idle, and pitched for 85 knots. Suddenly they felt the back wheels as touch down commenced and Alex pulled up hard, flaring the front wheels, keeping them off the ground for as long as possible. Final destination was reached with all wheels down and a centerline taxi on the runway. Next step was to taxi off the active runway and out of the way of oncoming traffic. Last call to the tower: "Sedona traffic, Cessna 69698 cleared active 21 for full stop, Sedona traffic."

"Time to breathe, little one. We're down, all safe and sound."

"I was breathing the entire time," Samantha lied with a straight face. "That was fun, exciting, and highly unusual."

"Okay now all we need to do it taxi up toward the hanger area." As they approached the hanger the two women could see the ground crew coming out to motion them into place. Alex parked the plane and began her engine shut down. After turning everything off and locking it down, she turned to the woman sitting beside her.

"Ready to begin the Sedona adventure?"

"You betcha!" The small blonde got up from her seat and followed Alex to the door. They were greeted by warmer than usual late summer weather and clean, fresh smelling air.

"Welcome to Sedona, Samantha." Alex gave her lover a short hug then looked out to see if Gary had sent a car to pick them up.

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Gary Black had no intention of leaving the meeting of one of his favorite people to employees. He decided to forego the limo and personally drove to greet Alexis Dorian. Without her help he was absolutely convinced his retreat in the red rock canyon of Sedona would never have amounted to the multi-million dollar business he enjoyed today. After all, it had been Alex's



suggestion to start the clinic here; his original plans were to build in Colorado Springs. The savvy businesswoman was always in his prayers of thanks when he looked out over his estate and the 100 acres he purchased seven years ago. The land itself had more than tripled its value and the resort, well . . . there wasn't another like it in the entire state.

It had been almost a year since he had actually seen Alex. They had talked on the phone occasionally, but it was always a treat to visit with the astounding lady in person. He had already been informed, by the exec herself, that this trip would be slightly different. She was bringing a new girlfriend along. He had never really liked Nikki and was hoping that the executive's taste had improved some from her last affair.

Never being one for negativity, Gary decided ahead of time to keep an open mind until he met the new person.

It was a short 20-minute drive and he pulled up to the edge of the tarmac just as the Cessna was coming to a complete stop. *Good timing, Alex, and another perfect landing. You are one hell of a pilot along with everything else you do so well. It's a shame your predilection is not the male of the species; we would have made a great team in more than just business.*

They had met at a convention for physical therapists and he fell, head over heels the first time he looked at her. What mortal could resist the raven hair flowing freely down her back and the mesmerizing glance of her baby blue eyes? Oh, he'd seen them turn ice blue a few times, but the other hue, the soft velvet was the color he always remembered. He was broken hearted when he found out she was a lesbian and he didn't have a snowball's chance in hell at winning the exquisite lady over. So, he did the next best thing - he became her friend and then extended the friendship into a business relationship. It worked out well for the two of them, except for the fact that he never married. Once he had the picture of the ideal woman in his mind, it was hard for any of the women he dated to match up.

The door of the Cessna was beginning to open so he pulled the Jeep further up on the tarmac, shut the engine off and got out of the car to go meet his friend.

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The tall beauty looked out over the runway and spotted a beige Jeep Cherokee. Standing beside the door was a middle-aged man with a slightly protruding belly; a full, neatly trimmed beard and long grayish hair tied back into a ponytail. "Looks like Gary came alone to meet us Samantha," she turned and informed her lover. "I think you'll like him; he's a very tender man."

"Oh? That's an odd description isn't it?"

"No, it's just the easiest way to describe him. He very soft spoken and has a soft, healing touch." Alex explained.

"And just how do you know about the touch?" Samantha wanted to know as they started down the step.

"I did tell you his specialty, remember Samantha?"

"Ah, yes," the small blonde smiled. "Let me see, you said he was a physical therapist and an expert in myofascial release massage, right?"

"Right. Have you ever had a massage without being touched?"

"Actually I can't say that I've had all that many massages." Samantha smiled up to catch the sun sparkling in radiant blue eyes. "Let's go meet your business friend."

Alex descended first then reached an arm up and helped Samantha down. Putting her arm around the smaller woman's shoulders, they walked towards Gary. As they got closer, she released her hold and stepped forward to give the burly man a hug.

"Good to see you Alex," he commented in his rich baritone.

"It's good to see you too, Gary. Looks like life's been treating you okay." She stepped back a bit and patted his rotund middle.

"I've become more of a teacher and less of the therapist; it shows in the body." He laughed heartily and then turned to look at Samantha. "And this is?"

Alex stepped back and introduced her lover to her friend. "This is Samantha Riley and today is her birthday. "

Without allowing Alex to finish the introduction, he stepped up to Samantha and held out his hand. " I'm extremely pleased to meet you Samantha and a happy birthday to you." The large man took Samantha's small hand in his and she could feel the warmth radiating from his touch.

*No exaggeration on the touch, Alex.* "I'm very pleased to meet you, too, Mr. Black . . ."

"No, none of that Mr. Black stuff; it's just Gary." His smile was as warm as his touch and Samantha was immediately put at ease. She had already decided that she liked the large, soft-spoken man. "So, let's get your luggage and get going, we're having a barbecue today so it will be an early dinner. Are either of you hungry?"

Alex laughed at the question, and Samantha elbowed her in the side as she shot green daggers in the direction of the dark-haired beauty. Leaning down Alex whispered, "I'm only kidding with you, don't be so serious - it's your birthday."

"I know," Samantha whispered back, "so you ought to be nice to me."

"I am being nice . . ."

"Did I say something to start a discussion?" Gary asked.

"Yes . . ." Alex started to answer.

"No . . ." Samantha butted in.

"Okay, that's as clear as quicksand." The confused man looked from one to the other of his guests.

Samantha sighed deeply, "To answer your original question, we are both starving. We had breakfast somewhere around 10:30 I think, and I'm positive there's not a trace of it left in my stomach. The discussion was about my hollow leg."

Involuntarily the man's eyes quickly glanced down at the shapely legs on the small blonde standing near him.

Alex burst into laughter. "Not literally Gary! She doesn't have a hollow leg. It's just that for the size of her she can eat her weight in food."

"All right as long as I didn't start a small war." He started to open the back door for Samantha, but Alex was right there beating him to it and helping her mate get into high backseat.

"Same old Alex," he mumbled, shaking his head.

The raven-haired beauty smiled over at her old friend across the top of the car. "Did you expect anything different?"

"Of course not, my friend." He opened his own door and allowed Alex to do the same as she stepped into the front passenger seat. "This is the Jeep you asked for. Does it meet with your approval?"

"Most definitely," Alex confirmed, "four-wheel drive and all. Did you get me the maps I asked about?"

"Right there in the glove box."

"Thanks Gary."

"My pleasure." Not wanting to put a damper on the festivities of the day but needing to get in some serious discussions about the reason for her being here, as delicately as possible he breached the subject. "When did you want to discuss business, Alex?"

Cool blue eyes looked over at him as she raised the accustomed eyebrow, accentuating her model perfect visage, but there was a twinkle in the blue eyes so he knew he wasn't treading on thin ice. "I thought we'd skip business today because it is Samantha's birthday. We'll be leaving Sunday so I figured tomorrow you and I can start and maybe one of your people can show Samantha around the establishment. She can perhaps take in a massage, listen in on a class or just relax in the springs or one of the pools."

"That sounds good, Alex, but it might take more than one day."

"And that's fine with us," she turned and included Samantha, "right Samantha?"

"Absolutely, I realize that this is a business trip first."

Alex turned back to face the driver, "Honestly Gary, I thought we could take most of Tuesday and Wednesday for business and then I could show Samantha around on Thursday. On Friday I want to take her on an overnight excursion. If there is anything to tie, up we can do that on Sunday before leaving. Does that sound fair enough to you?"

"Sounds very fair. Two full days should be more than enough time to go over the where, how, and how much considerations. People have been pushing hard for this addition; I think it's really going to be a plus for the center."

"You're absolutely right. They are hot items right now and only places like yours have the room or the finances to put them in after the business is already up and going."

"What kind of response is the climbing wall getting at your establishment?" he wanted to know.

"Fabulous, it was actually packed with pre-signed customers before we even opened."

"That's a good recommendation. I guess I should have listened to you a year ago when you talked to me about it."

"Better late than never, Gary."

"Yeah, I guess. So, how was your flight in?" He turned to Samantha and smiled.

"It was marvelous," the small blonde answered. "I've never been in a private plane before. It's really a lot different from the commercial airlines." She looked into the front seat at Alex. "But Alex is an excellent pilot."

"I've been up with her a few times; she knows her stuff." He smiled over at the executive.

"Actually I don't think there is anything Alex does that she doesn't do well." He winked in the rear view mirror at Samantha, who immediately blushed, even though she wasn't sure exactly why.

Alex chuckled in the front seat and gave Gary a tap on the shoulder. "That's enough of that, old boy."

"Has Alex explained to you about the positive vibrations here in this little mystical town of ours, Samantha?"

"Not really, she just said that it was beautiful and peaceful here and that you could come to know yourself better through the tranquility of the area. I have noticed that the red rock is gorgeous."

"This area is known for having positively charged vortexes, which are giant magnets of energy. About, geez, let me think, yeah . . . it was August of '87 there was a phenomena called the harmonic convergence which had to do with the planets being aligned in a certain way. It was a time of a vibrational shift and worldwide love and harmony was the theme. This little town was absolutely teeming with tourists.

"Anyhow, getting back to the vortex. The ones in this area, as I said, are positively charged which means they contain feminine attributes, the nurturing characteristics of yin. Bell Rock is extremely popular for newcomers to actually 'feel' the energy. We also have some of the negative or yang vortexes in the region, so whatever it is you are in need, the cure is not more than a 20 minute drive." He smiled up into the rearview mirror at the small blonde who graciously returned his hospitality.

"Sometimes the rocks are described by visitors as temples of energy and I've yet to see someone leave Sedona without feeling changed or moved emotionally for the better." He had turned off the main road a while back and was now turning into a long winding drive. Within minutes the main buildings were coming into view.

"This is the office building here in front, Samantha." Alex informed her lover as they got a little closer.

Samantha was significantly impressed with the expansive architecture, and the red cedar façade of the buildings blended perfectly with the red rocks and forest area surrounding the massage center. Until they had walked through the lobby and toward the back exit of the building, she hadn't realized just how large an establishment the Center was. The rest of the buildings had been hidden from view by either the front structure or the encircling Coconino National Forest.

"I can't wait for you to see this view, Samantha." Alex took her by the arm, leading her directly through the initial building and out through the back door. They stood on a huge cedar deck overlooking the complex. "It's deceptive when you first enter the building but we are actually located on a cliff here and the land drops and levels, as you can see nature did her own cutting out of the scenery." She pointed to the right toward a cascading waterfall. From where they stood, they could hear the faint sound of rushing water.

Alex pointed out the different segments of the establishment. The structures were situated so as to form an off kilter semi-circle; the back right portion of the area was taken up by the unbelievable falls.

"There are sun decks lining the treatment building so when the weather is nice treatments can be given outdoors."

The pool and Jacuzzi were located in the middle of the complex and Alex pointed out that there was another Jacuzzi over near the small lake that the waterfall emptied into.

All the way in the back left corner of the immediate acreage, almost invisible from the office area were stables and Alex told Samantha that Gary usually housed about six horses that could

be rented by the guests while they were using the facility. Lastly, to the left of them was the residential lodge where the staff lived and where clients stayed. Gary had a penthouse on the third floor, but Alex and Sam would be staying in one of the extended visit suites.

"I just can't believe how beautiful it is here. It's so different from the ocean view but has the same calming effect. This reminds me a little of home, with the lake and all." Samantha looked up into her lover's eyes - tears misting her own, "Thank you Alex. This has been the best birthday celebration I ever had. I feel like we left California, flew over the clouds, and landed in a different world."

"We kind of did, Honey. It's nature through completely different eyes. I think you'll really enjoy yourself when we go off and do some hiking and maybe even camp out on Friday night." The taller woman drew the blonde into a casual embrace. "Guess we should go get settled in."

Gary had left them at the main lobby right after he had one of the employees get their luggage from the car and take it up to the suite he had readied for them. He promised to meet them up in the room within the next 15 minutes.

Alex took Samantha up and showed her around the rooms. The blonde was impressed with the small deck off the bedroom from which they could view the waterfall and the entire complex below. When Gary arrived, he informed them that dinner preparations were already underway, but Alex told him that she had decided to take Samantha into town for her birthday dinner and invited him to join them. The invitation was promptly and politely refused, with the man stating that he felt they would probably enjoy a quiet dinner alone on such a momentous occasion. Even Samantha tried to coax him to come along, but he smiled knowingly and begged off.

"Do I dress up or is this place you have in mind casual, Alex?"

"How about in between? I'm going to wear dress pants with a blouse and light jacket. But first I'm going to call for reservations. We shouldn't have any trouble it's the beginning of the week."

"So a short dress and sandals would be okay?" Samantha asked.

"Great."

Forty-five minutes later they were dressed and stepping into the Jeep. "You don't mind riding around in a Jeep do you, Samantha?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"No, it's just that I requested Gary have this vehicle available to us while we were here because I wanted to take you to some off the road places. It's not real elegant . . ."

"Alex - it's a Jeep Cherokee, not an old beat up off-the-roader." She giggled at her lover's sense of the absurd. "Let me see. We have power windows and doors, air/heat, CD/cassette/radio, leather seats, and automatic 4-wheel drive. What are you apologizing for?" She waited until Alex

got into the driver's seat and then reached over and gave her a kiss. "What Am I going to do with you?"

"Love me forever."

"Most definitely, Sweetheart, most definitely."

Alex pulled up in front of a quaint European-styled restaurant nestled between towering red rocks and partially bordered by a swiftly flowing creek. After giving the keys to the valet, the two women entered the building. Upon arriving at the terrace room, the maitrê de welcomed them by name, smiled sweetly, and escorted them to their table, overlooking the babbling stream. Intimate lighting added an air of romance and soft jazz whispered through the eaves. Even though autumn gold and red was slowly beginning to dot the landscape, the smell of roses permeated the air and the atmosphere for the night was eloquently staged.

Samantha looked out over the terrace at the setting sun and took Alex's hand under the table. "It's absolutely magnificent. What a wonderful way to end my birthday. Thank you, Alex. We always manage to be somewhere magical at sunset, don't we?"

Alex squeezed the small hand and smiled, gazing lovingly into the crystal emerald eyes she loved. "I try to please," the raven-haired beauty murmured. "I'd give you the world if it were mine to give, Samantha."

The tender moment was interrupted as a waiter approached with a bottle of Mumm Cordon Rouge Cuvee Limitee 1990. "Compliments of Mr. Gary Black from the Center for Healing on the Rocks," he informed the women.

"Good old Gary," Alex grinned as she accepted the gift and had the waiter pour the champagne. "Thank you."

He placed the bottle into the ice filled silver holder and left them to sample their wine and look over the menus.

"So, here's to us, Samantha and a week of experiences."

Samantha raised her glass to touch her lover's and as the glasses clinked together she mouthed the words, "I love you," across the table to her heart's desire.

"Are you ready to order?"

"No," the blonde looked down at the menu with no prices. "What would you suggest?"

"Since this is a 'momentous occasion', I would say we go for the gusto and order the six-course gourmet dinner - are you up for it?"

Her eyes getting huge as she looked over the menu, Samantha swallowed hard, trying to imagine what a six-course gourmet meal would cost. Then she swallowed her foolish pride and shook the question out of her mind. "I think I could give it the good old college try," she smiled over at the dark-haired beauty.

"Great, then why don't we order two different entrees and we can share?"

"Fine," Samantha agreed. "Go ahead and order for both of us, Alex. I trust your taste," she smiled slyly.

"What?" Alex questioned.

"You chose me, didn't you?"

"Funny lady!" Alex motioned the waiter over and placed their selections. She started with the fresh lobster bisque with a touch of Cognac, followed by the salad with Gorgonzola cheese and balsamic vinaigrette dressing. Entrees were a little more difficult to pick but she asked Samantha if she liked lobster and from the look on the small woman's face it was definitely an affirmative. Consequently, Samantha received the braised Maine lobster with asparagus topped with Hollandaise sauce and Alex ordered the poached shrimp with zucchini topped with a creamy pesto.

The first course arrived with fresh baked French bread and whipped butter, followed shortly by the soup. Between the soup and the main course they were served a lemon sorbet with champagne to clear the palate and then the entrees arrived.

Samantha's eyes again lit up when the lobster arrived, fully removed from and sitting on top of its shell. "By the Gods, Alex. Would you look at the size of this!"

Alex grinned and shook her head, similarly receiving an oversized portion of poached shrimp. "If you think you are going to be stuffed eating it all, only eat some of it and we can take the rest home; we have a refrigerator in the suite. You must save room for dessert, Samantha. Their desserts are to die for!"

"Okay, but here let me split this with you before we start." She totally removed the shell onto a separate plate and the women proceeded to share their meals, eating and talking from one course to the next.

"It seems as though we've been eating forever and I still have a half full plate," Samantha remarked as she pushed the dish away from her. "You're right Alex, if I want to sample the dessert, I had best stop now."

"I agree." Alex looked over toward the anticipating waiter and he arrived, pushing the dessert tray. Samantha asked if they could have 'doggie bags', and the waiter assured them he would take care of everything. Before taking their plates he went over his tray full of divine decadence, describing each and every item on the silver wish cart. The ladies decided to share the delicacy



entitled simply 'the gift'. The waiter removed their dinner plates and inquired if they desired coffee, tea, or an after dinner drink. After being told they were fine with the rest of the champagne and water, he disappeared back into the kitchen area.

They sat discussing everything Alex had planned for the next few days and while they were talking Alex poured the last of the champagne into their glasses.

Within minutes their waiter returned trailed by four other waiters. The dessert they had ordered arrived with a small candle stuck in the middle burning as brightly as one small flame can do all by itself. Putting down 'the gift', the waiter smiled at Alex then looked over at Samantha as he and his four accomplices began to sing Happy Birthday in French to the blushing blonde. They all congratulated her when they had finished and their waiter told them he would be back directly with their leftovers.

"This looks almost too good to eat, Alex." Samantha began to examine the sugary concoction that was placed between the two of them. It was a small gift box made out of semi-sweet chocolate and filled with a white chocolate mousse. Topping the mousse was a large portion of raspberries, drizzled over with raspberry syrup, and finished off with the candle she had just blown out.

"You don't have to eat it, you know? We could have them wrap it to go and . . ."

"Very funny, Alex. No one likes a smart ass."

"Ah but everyone likes a little . . ."

"Alex! Behave."

"Samantha you take the fun out of my evening." The brunette teased as she dipped into the soft sweetness and offered the first bite to her destiny. "Sweets for the sweet."

"Ugh -- that is really an old line. Alexis Dorian, you are incorrigible, but I'll take the bribe." She opened her mouth and allowed Alex to feed her. Taking her time to empty the spoon she smiled, a twinkle in her emerald eyes that seduction was only a trip back to the center away. "Umm. Good," she acknowledged as she slowly licked her lips, her moist tongue following her lip line; her eyes never leaving Alex's.

Sitting opposite the tantalizing blonde, Alex could feel her body responding to the tease. "Okay, you have five minutes to help me make short work of this dessert and we, that is you and I, Ms Riley, have a date back at our suite."

As Samantha was about to answer, the waiter came back with two silver foil swans. "Your 'leftovers' ladies." Catching the surprised look on Samantha's face, their waiter, Michael, grinned as he gently placed the foil art on the table.

"Thank you, Michael; we'll take the check now." Alex informed him.

"Certainly Ms. Dorian." While he was retrieving the invoice, Samantha picked one of the swans up to exam it. "This is soooo cute." She looked up at the young man.

"Yes, they are rather creative, are they not, Miss." He handed the check to Alex. "I'll take care of it whenever you are ready."

He turned to leave and Alex touched him on the arm, "Just a second Michael." She took a quick inventory of the meal and glanced at the total. "Everything seems to be in order." Already having her wallet out, she pulled out a visa and handed it to the waiter. "There ya go."

"Thank you, Ms. Dorian, I'll be right back."

A long slender arm reached across the table and Alex's hand intertwined with Samantha's. "What do you think of Sedona so far?"

"The scenery is beautiful, the cuisine is exquisite, and the company I'm keeping . . . absolutely fantastic." Samantha smiled at her lover,

Alex looked down at her watch and then over into Samantha's eyes. "Only a few more hours left in this special day, my Destiny. Most of the shops are closed. What do you say we call it an evening and go back to the Center?"

With a twinkle in her verdant eyes, the small blonde winked at Alex and gave her a half-smile. "I suppose going back to the suite would be okay. It's been a pretty full day."

Suddenly life intruded on the poignant mood of the evening, as Samantha bore the look of a panic stricken animal. "Alex, you need to call home and make sure everyone arrived safely."

"No need to get so excited, Samantha. I couldn't call when we first got here; no one else was home yet. Ray and Sonny have quite a drive from the airport, and I don't know how long it takes Sally to get home. Here," she handed the anxious blonde the satellite phone. "Go ahead, call Mom."

"Okay . . . I'm sorry. It's just that I was so caught up in the day and the moment that I completely forgot we promised to call Mom and they promised to call Mom and . . ."

"Samantha, take a deep breath!" Alex instructed.

Samantha did.

"Now another and then . . ."

Michael returned with the check for Alex to sign. She informed him that the evening had been lovely and thanked him before he turned to go, leaving her the privacy to sign her bill.

"Now, where was I?" Alex asked.

"You were calming me down, but I'm quite all right now, Alex. I just got a little excited because I had forgotten."

"Well, I'm glad that's all over with," she smiled and recited her mother's number for Samantha to call. Aurora answered and informed Samantha that everyone had arrived at their destinations safely and in timely manners. She was pleased that the girls were having a good time and told her to give Alex a kiss for her but she had to run. Kelley had made reservations for a late dinner at one of their special restaurants and she was running late. Samantha hung up and with a broad smile on her relieved face, handed the phone back to its owner.

"Ready to go now?"

"Yes, and I feel 100 percent better knowing that everyone is home and safe."

The two got up and walked to the entrance of the restaurant where Alex handed the valet her ticket and within minutes they were on their way back to the Center.

"You know Alex, I could get used to traveling like this."

"Oh, you could, could you?"

The inside of the vehicle was dark, but Samantha knew by the intonation that there was definitely an arched eyebrow on the beautiful face of her lover and probably that crooked smile that tickled her heart.

"I just meant . . . who wouldn't want to travel around in their own plane . . . eating at elegant restaurants, and being the guest at a beautiful place like the Center?"

"There's no problem with doing things like this more often. Especially after we have that little chat I've promised you for soooo long. I will let you in on a little secret though."

"I love secrets," the small blonde admitted, looking over at her lover with anticipation.

"Alternative Paradise is a hobby, Samantha. I only started it to fulfill a need to give something back for all I've been given in my lifetime. We are not stuck working a 10-to-10 forever. If you want, we can start looking for permanent people to take over whenever we decide to go on a mini-vacation."

A small gasp of air escaped the small woman's lips as the impact of the confession reached her brain. *Damn that talk ought to be quite a shocker, if this is just a little secret.* To her lover she tried to respond in a normal tone of voice. "Alex it sounds marvelous when you talk about vacationing so much, but I think something gets lost in the translation between your mouth and my mind. It's all well and good that you might be able to afford to go on vacation whenever, but . . ."

"Let me ask you something, Samantha." Alex glanced over to the passenger seat and could see there was a look of concern on the small woman's face. "How many years have your parents been married?"

"Let me see I believe this year it would be 30, why?"

"In all that time has your mother ever worked?"

"No. She stayed home, took care of the house and all of us."

"Did you think she was wrong for doing that?"

"No." It was obvious the blonde was not, as yet, grasping in what direction the conversation was leading.

"Why not?"

"Hey, I know about all the feminist issues over being 'just a housewife'." It seemed Samantha was beginning to get very defensive over the discussion.

"Slow down, Irish - I'm not condemning your mom; I'm just asking you a few questions."

"Sorry, Alex. I just get really upset when women start . . . "

"My point exactly, Sweetheart. Maybe I should just cut to the chase. Do you think any less of your mom for staying home and taking care of the family and the home when you dad went out to work?"

"I think I already said no."

"Mainly because his job was away from the home and hers was in it, right?"

"Right."

"If he made enough money that he would only have to work, say three months out of the year, don't you think the family would have gone on many mini-vacations?"

"Yeah, I'm sure we would have. What are you getting at Alex?"

"Samantha."

By this time they were pulling up in front of the Center. Alex turned off the car and took her lover's hand. "What I guess I'm trying to say is that I have more than enough money to support the two of us, if I never work another day in my life. I work because I enjoy it and because before you came along there was nothing I had a passion for, nothing I really wanted to spend my money on. I enjoyed working. I still do but I wouldn't mind . . . "

"Whoa, Alex are you saying that I would never have to work another day in my life if I didn't want to?"

Alex gently kissed the small hand she had been holding in her own larger one. "Yes, my Destiny, I believe that is exactly what I am trying to say. I'm trying to say that you are my mate and anything that belongs to me belongs to you."

Samantha shook her head from side-to-side. "This is a lot to absorb at one sitting, Alex."

"I know, my love." She opened the car door and started to get out. "Why don't we take a walk down near the waterfall?"

"Can we put the leftovers in the room first?"

Alex couldn't help but laugh at the request, had it been her choice, they never would have troubled bringing the leftovers home. "Sure we can, Samantha," she answered the blonde's question, while reaching back and grabbing the bag containing the two swan dinners, then she went around to join Samantha on the other side of the car.

Walking up to the building, Alex suggested that they merely put the bag inside. She assured Samantha it would be quite safe sitting in the doorway until they came back to go upstairs.

The soft rustling of the falls turned into a gentle roar the closer they got to the cascading waters.

"It's so peaceful here, Alex." Samantha looked around at the encircling trees and rock formations surrounding the buildings, which seemed to have been constructed so as not to disturb the nature of the area.

"Yes, this is a great place to come and unwind. You'll get a nice treat tomorrow. I had Gary set you up with one of his best people for a massage. Later in the afternoon, before the stores close I want to take you down to a couple of the crystal shops. This is an esoteric little town here."

"That sounds like fun," Sam agreed. They stopped when they got closer to the falls and stood watching the moonlight as it danced in the water. The taller woman stepped behind the smaller and cradled her in her arms. Samantha leaned back and placed her head on Alex's chest.

"I could stand here forever with you in my arms, my Destiny." She gently kissed the soft golden crown and squeezed her lover closer.

"I could, too." Samantha bent her head back to look up into eyes sparkling with starlight as Alex bent down to kiss the top of her forehead. "Do you know the stars are dancing in your eyes tonight, my love?" the small blonde queried.

"If they are, it's only because I'm standing so close to Heaven when you are in my arms." She turned Samantha around to face her. "Let's go up, okay?"

"Yeah, I think it's about time."

Hand in hand they took the long way back to their building, around the falls, through the middle of the court, between the structures, and around the pool. The pace was entirely different here than it had been the entire weekend before. No more the incessant need to rush here and there; solitude stood out in this picturesque setting. Here . . . now . . . they could simply relax and enjoy each other and the richness of nature in this secluded canyon nestled deep in Arizona's red rock. Samantha picked up their swans as they entered the building and examined again the intricacies of the foil creatures. "Aren't these cute?" She looked up at Alex who tried to show interest in wrapped leftovers.

"Sure are."

"I've never seen a doggie bag look this elegant before."

They reached the suite and Alex held the door for Samantha to enter with her little amusements. "Here, let me put those in the frig."

"Okay -- want to take a Jacuzzi?"

"Nothing sounds better," Alex answered as she walked toward the kitchenette.

"I'll get it started."

"Great, I'll get us something to drink." She knew Gary well enough to know that he would have stocked the small kitchen area with necessities and knowing Alex, he knew champagne, wine, and beer were three top priorities. A bottle of Perrier-Jouët Fleur de Champagne was residing in the refrigerator when she opened it, along with a large fruit tray. On the kitchen counter were a dozen red roses with a note:

*Alex ~ Thought these might be appropriate for the little one's birthday celebration, knew you hadn't the time to make small purchases. She's a real charmer. Enjoy your evening. I'll see you in the morning. Fondly ~ Gary.*

The dark-haired beauty smiled as she remembered back to a time long ago when the champagne and flowers had been offered to her as an enticement to make their relationship one of more than simply business. She still remembered the look on her friend's face when she explained to him that men were not her preference, and she was glad they had been able to work through that awkward period in their relationship.

She retrieved the bubbling liquid from its abode and proceeded to pop the cork.

"I heard that," Samantha yelled from the bathroom.

"Can't surprise you with anything, can I?"

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far." Samantha came to the entrance between the bedroom and living room wearing nothing but a smile. "Are you about ready?"

"Just about." Alex turned and almost dropped the fluted glasses she held in her hand when she looked over at her lover. "Would you like this champagne in your mouth or on the floor? Don't sneak up on me like THAT! "

"Like what? You want me to take a bath fully clothed? Oh, my look at the roses, thank you Alex." She started closer to her lover.

"No I don't want you fully clothed, but to just appear naked . . . well . . . it just threw me off balance, and I didn't get the flowers, Gary did. Seems like I'm never the one getting the flowers for you -- what's with that anyhow? First Angel and now Gary." She was grinning so Samantha knew she was only kidding.

"I don't know, I guess I'm just irresistible," the small woman teased, raising an eyebrow like her counterpart always did.

"Okay, irresistible, get your naked body into the other room before we forego the bathing and get right to the bedding." Still toting the champagne bottle and fluted glasses she started toward the bathroom behind Samantha.

"Here let me take the bottle; oh this bottle is beautiful . . . would you just look at those white flowers on it." She took the bottle examining it.

"This champagne even more than a lot of the others is known as the champagne for lovers," Alex informed Samantha.

"Really, why?"

"The wine was originally produced by a couple in the 1800s, who were very much in love. In the early 1900's a relative inherited the winery. It was he, who decided to decorate the bottle, so that it would reflect the passion and romance of the couple who originally created the champagne. He commissioned an artist of the day to do the design and the rest is history."

"That is romantic. Here, let me get the glasses." She took them from Alex and put them over on the Jacuzzi. "We'll all be waiting right here for you when you get undressed."

Samantha stepped into the churning, scented, bubbling water. "Aaah, this feels great." Sinking down into the warm liquid she sat anxiously awaiting Alex to join her. With her eyes closed Samantha let her head fall back onto the headrest.

Sam jerked when a soft kiss touched her forehead, "Leave you for two minutes and you're sitting there snoring," Alex chuckled.

"Was not!" Samantha objected.

"Oh, yes you were, I know snoring when I hear it, and it's not very romantic." She smiled as she stepped into the tub and sat down next to her lover.

Samantha splashed her slightly and giggled, "I was just pretending, seeing if you'd notice."

"Yeah, and I'm Minnie Mouse. You don't want to start a splashing fight, Samantha. I hate bubbles in my bubbly." Alex reached over and picked up the two glasses from the rim, handing one to the blonde. "I guess this officially ends your birthday celebration."

"What about the rest of the week we're spending here?"

"The next couple of days are business and the last few are a well-earned mini-vacation. So . . ." she raised her glass to touch her lover's, "Happy Birthday, my Destiny, and may this just be the beginning of our celebrations together."

"Thank you, Honey. My wish is the same." Sam took a sip of the sparkling liquid. "Umm, this is fabulous! But it's really different from the one at dinner. That had a slightly vanilla taste and this one is more like fruit. It's delicious."

"Yes . . . well . . . I know what I've been waiting all day to 'taste'." The tall beauty pulled her lover over to her. Samantha wrapped her legs around Alex's waist, putting her arms around the long neck and running her fingers through thick dark hair. "I love you, Alex. You know that don't you?"

"I think I do."

"There should be no thinking to be done, just knowing and feeling." Small hands continued to massage and Alex put her head down for Samantha to continue.

"That feels so damn good."

"Feels good to me, too," the blonde admitted as she kissed the ebony head.

Alex looked directly into her lover's eyes. "Those emeralds of yours are really sparkling tonight; have you mischief on your mind, my love?"

"No . . . no mischief . . . just pleasure."

"Pleasure, now that's something I could get used to."

"I was counting on that." Samantha slid back a bit on Alex's legs, still leaving less than an arm's length between them, but giving her the ability to touch her lover's face, and run her fingers down the elegant neck to the nape of her shoulders.

"Even in this warm water, I'm getting chills, Samantha."



"Good, that way I know you're paying attention," the small blonde smiled as she leaned in again and began planting small, quick kisses over Alex's cheeks. "I love to touch you, kiss you, feel you."

While her lips played delicately on her lover's face, her hands were finding a different playground. Alex had been sitting with her arms around Samantha's waist, allowing the smaller woman to have her way with her, but as the small hands began to travel downward, Alex refused to sit still without joining in the fun. She began tracing her own fingers down the body in front of her and watching as Samantha's nipples responded to the tender caresses.

"No fair, Alex. You get to sit and be the strong, silent type tonight."

"I am the strong, silent type, but that doesn't mean I can't touch."

"I think it's getting very close to the witching hour, but until that clock strikes, it's still my birthday and my wish is to pamper and make love to you."

The dark-haired beauty leaned back against the Jacuzzi and slid down slightly, still keeping the blonde perched on the top of her thighs.

"I'm all yours - until the clock strikes 12 - then you had best watch out because I'm warning you, I intend to join in."

Samantha switched from sitting on both of Alex's thighs to positioning herself on only one. She sensuously slid her body from the top of the thigh to the knee and back again. The entire time she was moving her body, she was running her fingers down Alex's torso. The exquisite torture began at the long, swan neck, and continued down, encircling the firm breasts, then farther down to play hide-and-seek in the naval. The next movement of her hands found her fingers tangled around the soft dark curls of Alex's curly mound, all the while pressing firmly down on the muscular thigh as she rubbed back and forth, pleasuring herself almost as much as she was her lover.

"Damn Samantha. I wish midnight would hurry and get here. I know that even if we weren't sitting in this tub, my thigh would still be wet."

Samantha arched her back, teasing Alex, as the taller woman's arms kept a tight hold on the smaller woman's back to keep her from falling backward into the water. Sam then slid forward again, this time letting her fingers touch the swollen nub between the folds of dark curly hair. With one hand behind Alex's neck she placed her face next to one small ear and whispered softly, "I'm going to make you come harder than you ever have for anyone else in your life." With that she circled the ear with her tongue, then sucked contentedly on the earlobe. At the same time while pressing her body into her lover's she allowed two fingers to enter Alex's depths of passion, while her thumb continued to play with the outer regions of love.

"I love you Alex," she murmured as she slid back, causing her fingers to slip almost totally out. Then she slid back and as she closed the gap between their bodies, her fingers once again entered, this time harder and deeper.

The movements became more and more rhythmical as Samantha quickened her pace and when Alex could stand it no longer, she pulled the smaller woman close and refused to allow her to separate from her again.

"What do you want, my darling?" Samantha purred into Alex's ear. "Tell me what you want."

"Samantha don't play this game," Alex growled.

"Oh, but we've played before," Samantha grinned, continuing to move her fingers in and out. "You liked it then, remember?"

Alex had to grin back at her Irish imp as Samantha was only playing the game she had taught her. Having the shoe on the other foot was not as much fun, she was finding out. But, being a sport, she decided to play along.

"You asked for it, my Destiny." Alex pulled Samantha closer, so that it was now her mouth on the small ear framed by the soft golden hair.

"I want you to fuck me Samantha."

Alex heard a small gasp escape from her lover's lips. She had never used that term with Samantha before, but the blonde had her so keyed up and she had insisted on knowing what she wanted . . . "I want you to fill me with you and continue to ride your way to passion's fulfillment on my thigh." She tightened her thigh muscles and lifted her leg to give more friction to the movements as she began assisting Samantha in sliding up and down.

The small woman held Alex tighter and inserted yet another finger into her lover, then proceeded to increase the rhythm as she fluctuated in and out - in and out - all the while sliding back and forth on the muscular thigh. The water was cooling and spilling from the tub but neither of the lovers was paying any attention to something, which had nothing whatsoever to do with what they were experiencing.

The harder and faster Samantha entered her lover, the harder and faster she rode the well-defined leg. Finally, neither of them could stand it any longer and she bore down on Alex's leg while penetrating her lover to the fullest . . . holding, holding, holding . . . then feeling the strong inner muscles close ever so tightly on her hand. The spasms began, and Samantha smiled knowing that she had succeeded in doing exactly what she had set out to do. Alex quivered and shook, then spasmed again. Samantha forced her hand higher, pushing hard on the outside with her thumb and sucking on Alex's neck at the same time, sucking with a passion almost out of control.

Alex let out a groan and as Samantha started to disengage her hand a stronger one covered it and pushed her back inside. With a final shiver and spasm Alex let go of Samantha's hand and collapsed back into the Jacuzzi seat.

Ever so softly she confessed that Samantha had succeeded in her quest and the small blonde smiled. Samantha once again sat on both her lover's thighs as she leaned against her dark angel's chest and kissed the neglected breasts.

"The water's kinda cool," Samantha finally noticed.

"Yeah, and the midnight hour has passed," Alex added. "I suppose you know what that means?"

"Yes, it's no longer my birthday."

"No. It means it's my turn." The tall woman scooted Samantha off her legs and stood up, offering the smaller woman a hand. Getting out of the tub they each grabbed a towel and Alex poured them a fresh glass of champagne which they took into the bedroom with them.

Quickly drying off and drinking their wine, they pulled the covers down and lay on the crisp, clean sheets.

"Are you too tired to do anything else?" Alex asked, hoping for a negative response.

"I'm tired, but certainly not too tired to continue making love to you."

"No, no . . . that part of the evening is over, my Destiny." Alex shifted her position until she was on top of the smaller woman, holding the upper portion of her body up with strong, well-defined arms.

"It's now my turn to make love to you." The look of love appearing on Alex's face was so intense that Samantha simply smiled; no comment was needed. She reached her arms up and placed a small hand on either side of the face she now knew almost as well as her own.

Without blinking or losing eye contact the raven-haired beauty lowered herself until their partially parted lips were barely touching, "You're my world, Samantha. Don't ever leave me," she breathed into her lover's mouth. "As strong as I may seem to others, I don't believe I would survive if you went away."

A single tear trickled down the beautiful face and caught on the tip of Samantha's tongue, just as she was about to kiss her lover's lips.

"You're stuck with me forever, my love, have no fear," the green-eyed beauty whispered.

The bittersweet kiss evoked an ache in the heart of the small blonde, and she pondered on how she could be so important to someone as wonderful as Alex. As she drank in the essence of their mingling tongues she decided that fate most definitely played a part in their chance meeting. If a

near deserted beach could bring two strangers together, nothing save for the Gods alone could tear her away from these lips, these arms, and the passionate blue searching eyes of her heart's desire.

Alex rolled onto her back, holding onto the small frame that had been under her and bringing Samantha to lie on top. She could feel the pounding of the smaller woman's heart increase as their lips remained locked. She wanted to crawl inside Samantha, consume every ounce of love the woman had to offer and lock it up inside her own heart so it might never escape. Her long, slender fingers left a pattern of goose bumped flesh in their wake as they traveled down the curve of her lover's back, coming to rest on two firm buttocks.

Alex opened her legs and Samantha fell between them, the mounds of the two women touching as ebony and gold intermingled and the fire within each body flickered out to find its release in the touch of the other.

"I won't ask you what you want tonight, my Destiny," Alex softly growled into Samantha's ear. "Instead I will tell you my desire. I will announce my ever move. I will voice my thoughts as I enter you and make known how much a part of my soul you have become."

"First, I'm going to do everything different tonight." With hands slipping up to rest on either side of Samantha's hips, Alex brought her into a sitting position, their soft nether curls still touching. She placed one hand on Samantha's breast and the other slowly made it's way between the two bodies as she spread the golden folds with one adept hand and placed two fingers gently up inside the already moist recesses of her lover.

Samantha let out a small cry of desire as Alex's hand entreated her to move up and down.

"I want to look into your eyes tonight Samantha. I want to capture every facial expression you reveal and keep it my memory forever." Increasing the speed of her hand she smiled as Samantha could no longer remain fully erect without placing her hands on Alex's thighs as the larger woman traveled in and out of the dark recesses of the smaller.

Without warning, Alex flipped positions and without removing her hand from inside Samantha's passion she lowered her body down until her mouth covered the now swollen outer nub.

"I'm going to suck you dry of all your essence Samantha. I am obsessed with your taste, the feel of you in my mouth.

"Oh Alex do you know what you're . . . "

"I certainly hope so Samantha," the dark-haired woman smiled.

"I could dine on you for hours," she confessed.

Samantha's utterances became louder as Alex attempted to consume her lover's elixir. Occasionally sapphire eyes would glance up at Samantha's face to watch her expressions as they

changed and to catch a glimpse of the small hands grabbing at the sheets and holding on until the knuckles turned white.

"I will take you to the brink and over. I promise." Alex's tongue flicked rapidly over the protruding bud, then down lower as she took her hand away and replaced it with her tongue, which she drove deep within her lover's overflowing well of passion.

Small hips could not keep from undulating as Alex's tongue continued to advance and retreat.

Moans of delectation filled the room and the scent of love permeated the air.

"I want you to come for me Samantha. Hard . . . and now . . . with my tongue deep inside you."

Alex continued with the in and out motion of her tongue, smiling inwardly when she began to feel the walls of the small, moist cave tremble and the spasms begin. She continued to plunge her tongue in and out, quickly and rhythmically until finally she removed the soft organ and replaced it with short spurts of thrust with her hand. A change of position found Alex astride the shapely thigh of her lover, rubbing her own passion up and down, sliding over the leg until the two women, in a simultaneous second of rapture, burst into orgasm.

Alex collapsed next to her lover, totally spent and utterly content.

Minutes passed as silence filled the air, and stillness surrounded the two women, save for the involuntary muscle fluctuations neither could control.

"Alex . . ." Samantha began.

"Hush Samantha," Alex pleaded, as she kissed her own index and middle fingers and gently placed them on her lover's lips.

Samantha hushed.

A few minutes later, Alex got up from the bed, walked over to the champagne bottle and poured the remaining liquid into the flutes.

Quietly she sat down on the bed next to the blonde, handing her the glass. "Never Samantha," she began, "never in my life have I ever been so lost in someone else. I have always been one who needed to be in control of every situation. When I'm with you I'm not even in control of my senses, no less the situation. Nothing else in the world matters when I'm making love to you and acting or looking vulnerable is no longer an issue because I simply don't care."

A satisfying grin was all she received from the imp of a woman now sitting next to her on the bed, as she reached out and kissed her gently.

"I feel the same way, Alex. I want you so badly sometimes I hurt inside. I've never wanted anyone or anything in my entire life the way I want being with you."

"You know, Samantha, Mom tried to explain to me long ago that when I met the one person in my life who was destined to remain with me throughout this lifetime that I would lose all my inhibitions. She told me all sense of self would diminish and that I would meld so completely that the only way I could be happy would be to have that person beside me. I was sure she was wrong, but now I know she wasn't. Don't let me forget to remind her of that distant talk. I need to tell her how right she was."

"I'll be sure to remember, Alex," Samantha promised as she reached over and placed the empty glass on the nightstand and Alex did the same with hers. "Can I also tell her that I feel exactly the same way?"

Samantha's Princess Charming kissed her gently on the cheek, "I'd be thrilled and I'm sure Mom would, too."

The two women lay back down and Alex took her life-mate into her arms, knowing that sleep would soon claim them both and that the new morning would welcome them, far before they were ready to unravel from each other's arms.

Continued in Part 8.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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### ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## **Part 8**

### **Chapter 8**

The Sedona sunrise brought dancing rays of light streaming into the windows of the guest suite. Alex stirred as the first beam played good morning games on her face. She gently freed herself from Samantha's hold and scooted out of bed.

Serenity always caught up with her here in this quiet town, and even she tended to oversleep, if only for an hour, whenever she stayed among the red rocks. It was quiet at home as well, but there was also the fact that at any moment the ocean could turn and become an angry, destructive force. Here the calm seemed to weave its spell into every molecule of the surrounding landscape. Only the occasional afternoon thunderstorm broke the majesty of the peaceful countryside, and even that seemed to add to, instead of detract from the beauty of the Sedona.

The tall brunette silently thanked their host for supplying them with some of her favorite teas as she started brewing a pot, then she headed for the shower. Her intentions were to put a couple of bagels in the toaster after her shower, to titillate the nostrils and awaken the sleeping beauty in the bedroom.

Alex hummed quietly, as she lathered her thick dark hair then commenced soaping up the rest of her body, thinking as she did that she was getting lax in the exercise department and needed to start concentrating on it again. She didn't hear as the shower door was opened and let out an unusual exclamation when Samantha stepped in and touched her. "Damn, Samantha! You scared the Holy Shit out of me."

The smaller woman was taken back at Alex's tone. "Sorry, Alex." She backed against the shower wall, hands up as though she was the victim of a robbery. "I thought for sure you'd hear the door opening."

*Well, you should have you know!* The dark-haired beauty mentally cursed. *You're really slipping, Alex; you should have known she was here - Before she touched you! Guess that's what happens when you're too damn happy with your life to practice your disciplines!*

After getting over the initial shock, she apologized to Samantha for yelling at her. "It's just that you startled me. I don't know where my mind was exactly, but it wasn't here. I think I was lining up all we're going to do this week and . . ."

"It's okay, Alex. I should have made some noise when I came into the bathroom. I hate to be surprised like that. I just assumed you'd hear me." She stepped closer to her lover and gave her a good morning hug.

"This certainly makes everything okay," Alex assured the small blonde as she held her close. "You want me to wash your hair?"

"Yeah, that would feel good."

"What woke you up so early, Samantha? Usually I have to drag your butt out of bed."

"Probably the excitement of a new place." She stopped and thought a minute more. "Maybe I'm beginning to like getting up early in the morning . . . just like you." She smiled up at the tender blue eyes looking down at her, a mischievous grin lighting up her fair face. "On the other hand . . . nah!" She shook her head from side to side.

The taller woman began tickling the blonde.

"Uncle, Alex, uncle." Samantha pleaded.

"Uncle Who?" Alex questioned, laughing.

"Alex, I can hardly b-r-e-a-t-h-e."

"Serves you right." The dark-haired beauty chided. "First you shock the shit out of me and then you make fun of my getting up early. What do you think I should do with you?"

Samantha grabbed the two strong hands that had now ceased tickling. Still holding them tightly she reached around her waist and placed them on her buttocks. Stepping closer to the muscular body before her, Sam looked up into her dark angel's face. There was still a spark of mischief in her eyes, but her lips held a more serious expression as she stood on her tiptoes to kiss the woman of her dreams. "We could start the day with water games."

"That might cut into our having breakfast together."

"I think I would rather be breakfast than . . ." Samantha crooned.

"Ooo . . . I do like the sound of that suggestion." Samantha grabbed the bar of soap from its holder and started lathering her body, while the dark-haired beauty began massaging the golden locks with shampoo. Cascading water rinsed the suds off both the women, and in a short period of time, they were out of the shower and standing in the bathroom, wrapped in soft towels.

"Here, Alex, let me dry you off." Samantha took the towel from her lover's hands, while her own still clung to her body.

"Some areas won't be worth drying; they'll just get wet again," the tall woman admitted with a crooked grin.



"Well, I'll get the Water off, anyway." Samantha returned the smile while rubbing the light blue towel over her partner's body. The soft material eagerly sopped up droplets of liquid from the muscular shoulders, back, legs, arms, oops . . .

"I think that's enough!" Alex took the towel from Samantha.

"Gee, I was just getting started," the small blonde grinned and whined at the same time.

"I don't think the towel was meant to go on an inward search of damp things to absorb, if it's not out in the open, it's supposed to be moist." Alex smiled as she took the towel and tossed it on the floor. "I do believe you're finished with that." Then she took the towel still wrapped around Samantha, twirling the smaller woman in the process.

"And . . . I do believe you are finished with this, also." Another towel dropped unceremoniously to the carpet.

The sun was slowly filling the rooms with light, as Alex stepped closer to her lover. "It simply doesn't matter what kind of light you're standing in, my angel. You are the most perfect thing I've ever laid eyes on."

Pink quickly covered Samantha's cheeks as she blushed. Alex planted a tender kiss on her lover's neck and then nibbled hungrily on the soft earlobe.

The blonde shivered and tilted her head, making it difficult for Alex to position her tongue around the outer rim of Samantha's ear. "You're giving me goose bumps, Alex."

"They look like love bumps to me." The reply was punctuated with a long finger trailing from the tip of Samantha's chin to the puckered pink areola of Samantha's breast. "Yes, I have to insist, my darling, love bumps."

"You're right. They are love bumps, Alex. You're driving me crazy with love bumps." Again Samantha shivered and leaned into the statuesque body standing in front of her.

"Are you complaining?" Alex questioned.

"No! Just stating a fact."

"Well, since you're not complaining," Alex picked Samantha up and carried her all of three feet to the bed. Gently putting her prized possession down, she crawled onto the bed next to her.

"I am so lucky you decided to get up early this morning."

"How do you come to the conclusion that you're the one who's lucky? It seems like I'm the one being made love to."

"Ah, but I get to do the making, so I'm the fortunate one."

Suddenly the smile drooped slightly and the twinkle dulled from the sapphire eyes. "Samantha - enjoy your massage today - but not too much, okay?"

"Alex!"

"I'm serious." She was unconsciously doodling with her fingers on the skin of Samantha's stomach. "Myofascial massages can be extremely stimulating."

"Alex that's totally ridiculous." A small hand reached over and caught the distracting fingers in a tight grip.

"Just . . . well . . . never mind . . . Hey, I'm sorry I brought it up. I just let my mind wander into forbidden territory." The twinkle returned to her eyes as Alex bent over to kiss Samantha, but she was stopped by hands pushing back on her shoulders, a slightly irritated face staring up into her baby blues.

"Listen, a massage means nothing to me. I've never had one and I don't really care if I ever do, except for one that you might give me. Why don't I just forego the activity? I can do something else for that hour or so, I'm sure of it."

"Now, who's being ridiculous?"

"Not me! This is so not worth an argument."

"I think you are being foolish." Alex disputed.

In a heartbeat, the romantic atmosphere had diminished. Alex mentally kicked herself for starting the damn conversation in the first place, but here it was staring them in the face. She was jealous. She knew that each and every one of Gary's people were professionals, yet she was jealous at the mere thought of someone, other than herself, touching the seductive body lying less than six inches away from her. *How many times did you get onto Her for being jealous of Angel? Yeah, but Angel wasn't going to give me a full-body massage while I was naked!*

The mood had been broken.

Sea-green eyes stared unbelievably into her lover's face, and Samantha sat up. "Alex, how could you even . . . "

"I said I was sorry, Samantha."

"Yes, I know, but I think you still think . . . "

"What I think has nothing to do with how you would react, it's more how . . . "

"How you Think I would react is the most important facet of this entire conversation, Alex. The pivotal point of course would be my reaction to someone making a pass at me. I'm sure the

masseuse is not going to do anything wrong. I'm positive you know that . . . so . . . the entire area of doubt is my reaction. This ludicrous discussion is exclusively about me!"

The fair-skinned face flushed red, as green eyes took on their Irish and the tone of voice pitched high.

"Do you realize you just went from near orgasmic to furious in less time than it takes to dial 911?" Alex's soft contralto tried to reason with the now upset blonde.

Samantha started to say something more but stopped mid thought, her jaw dropping open. Closing her mouth and sighing she sat down, shaking her head. "No one has ever been able to push my buttons like you do." The anger in her voice had subsided and a sad quality took its place. "I don't like the way I feel when I get mad at you, Alex."

Sapphire eyes tried to elicit a smile out of the smaller woman, "Then don't."

"I'm not kidding."

"Neither am I." She reached out for the small blonde, who this time fell gratefully into strong arms.

A small voice quietly murmured, "I guess we kind of ruined the morning for making love, didn't we?"

"It did take the intensity off the moment; I'm sorry Samantha."

"It's okay, Alex. I guess it just goes to show that you're human, besides I should be flattered that you think a professional would actually risk their license just to make a pass at me!" A hint of the imp was back in the sea-green eyes that looked up at Alex. "If you aren't going to make love to me, are you at least going to feed me? After all, I'm up and showered before the sun has gotten more than an hour over the horizon."

"What do you say we go down to the dining room and have pancakes?"

"Oh, gee." Samantha placed an outstretched arm into Alex's hand. "Here . . . twist . . . please."

"I'm suppose to meet Gary in about a half an hour, do you mind if I ask him to join us for breakfast?"

"Of course not! But don't you think we ought to get dressed first?" She winked over at her heart-mate, who was already picking up the phone to dial their host.

"What a novel idea, Samantha. Ah . . . hello . . . Gary . . . listen I'm running a little late . . . don't get smart . . . uh huh . . ." She smiled and glanced over in Samantha's direction. "We thought maybe you might want to meet us in the dining room for breakfast . . . Great . . . about 20 minutes? We'll be there!"

"Okay you, everything's set for 20 minutes from now. Get that body of yours clothed before I change my mind and call him back." Alex was flashing the irresistible smile that Samantha could not resist, so she quickly turned away and began dressing before she became the one who instigated the call back to their host and cancelled the breakfast date.

By the time the duo arrived in the dining area, Gary was already sitting at the table. He looked up as the women came in close proximity. "I was told you were a late sleeper, Samantha. What got you up so early today?"

"The clean air and beautiful setting, I think. Besides I'm excited about getting an in-depth tour of this place." Samantha smiled over at Gary as she sat down. She picked up the menu and began studying the contents. "You have a nice selection of breakfast foods. I didn't realize a place like this would have its own restaurant."

"We try to keep everyone happy. When we started out, we only had a continental breakfast and some sandwich and salad stuff for lunch or dinner. But we found that a lot of our guests didn't want to leave the complex, so we've become more of a self-contained resort, basically for those who want to stay within our boundaries during their visit. We're very progressive and even have some soy 'meats' for our vegetarian friends." He smiled broadly over in Alex's direction.

"Hey," the dark-haired beauty addressed her friend and business associate. "There are two of us now, which means you are the one who is outnumbered at this table."

"Oh?" His brow arched as he gazed in the direction of the blonde. "You're a veggie-head Sam?"

"Kind of, I still eat fish, so I'm not a total vegetarian." Samantha confessed.

"Close enough. I've got to admit I've slowed down on the red meat a lot the past few years. I just like to give this partner of yours," he touched Alex's arm, "a difficult time, and there aren't many things I can tease her about."

"I think I could manage to find you a few if I dug a little deeper, want some extra fuel?" Samantha offered.

Now it was Alex's turn to raise an eyebrow, as she looked from one to the other of her companions at the table. "What is this, pick on Alex day?"

"Sounds like a pleasant enough way to start a morning," Samantha smiled and nodded at Gary.

Alex re-opened her menu and started looking at it. "I think we should order breakfast and change the course of this conversation."

"Party pooper." Samantha teased, before voicing her food decision. "I want pancakes and the soy sausage with a large glass of orange juice."

Gary motioned to the waitress that they were ready and she cheerfully came over to take the orders.

When the meals arrived they were still talking about what Samantha was going to be doing to occupy her time, while Alex was working. Gary had set her up with an extended tour of the entire facility, including the stables and told her that if she wanted to go riding that Janet had volunteered to go along with her. At 11:00 she was set for an hour to hour and a half massage, including some myofascial release with a visit to the spa afterward. He figured Alex would be ready for a break around 1:00 and suggested that the three of them meet up for lunch.

Alex interjected that she wanted to be totally finished around 4 o'clock so she could take Samantha into town to a few of the shops. Luckily most of the ones she frequented stayed open late.

Janet arrived at the table just as they were finishing. She said good morning to Gary and Alex and then Gary introduced her to Samantha.

"So, Samantha, are you ready to get started? Gary made sure you don't have a single free minute, while he and Alex are busy doing mundane stuff like work?" Janet's dark brown eyes twinkled when she spoke of her boss, and Samantha could see the mischief surfacing via the woman's crooked smile. She was sure this was going to be an interesting morning.

Green eyes swiped a quick glance at Alex before starting to get up from the table. The raven-haired beauty grabbed Samantha's hand and gently squeezed. "Have a great morning Honey; we'll see you at lunch."

"Don't work too hard, you two," were Samantha's last words as she walked out of the room and onto the patio with her guide.

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"Okay," Janet began as they exited the dining room. "We might as well start with the first building built and end up at the last. They walked out of the residential building and over to where the offices were all located. "This was the first site constructed about seven years ago. As you can see the waterfall is visible from every room on the rear side of the building. The final plans had been papered out even before groundbreaking, but they needed a starting place and cutting off the view of the waterfall from the entrance seemed to be a good place to start. The illusion of otherworldliness was what Gary and Alex had in mind from the very beginning. Together they worked out what each stage of the development would be. As a team they're unbeatable. Samantha, you should be very proud of Alex. With Gary's imagination and vision and Alex's expertise on how to put businesses together, there was no chance of failure. This particular site had been Alex's suggestion. Gary had been looking at a location somewhere around Colorado Springs, Colorado. It had to have been fate for the two of them to connect because this setting was ideal for what Gary wanted to accomplish."

Doors to offices opened to expose large, sunny rooms with expansive views of the court below. Not only would this be a marvelous place to visit, vacation, learn, and heal, but it also seemed as though it would be a fantastic place to work and live.

"How long have you been with Gary, Janet?"

"I've been here since the beginning. Gary contracted me to coordinate the mass hiring that would be done before the doors opened. He wanted to make sure the minute the construction was finished that everything would be ready to go, so we started offering employment as soon as the construction people broke ground. Gary was very particular as to the kind of people he wanted to hire. They had to be truly caring and spiritual - not religious mind you - but spiritual in the respect that they had to have a kinship with nature and with their higher selves. They also needed to be open to learning new and innovative therapeutic procedures."

"That's quite unusual, isn't it, hiring a staff before the buildings are completed?"

"Yeah, but the discipline Gary wanted to offer his clientele didn't have that many seasoned practitioners when we started, so we did extensive interviewing, matching the therapists with the vision and then Gary personally trained each and every one of the first employees."

"So this myofascial ... is really different from just massage?"

"Oh, definitely! It's a total awareness of the body and the mind; it's not just a massage, Samantha. I'll let you be the final judge after you've received yours. It's like a vehicle that allows your body to connect with your mind and from that link a true healing emerges."

"I can't wait. We studied about the fascia when I was taking my transcription courses, but we didn't go into the massage part."

Janet went back to playing tour guide. "So, originally this building housed not only the offices but Gary's apartment, the first classrooms, and the first massage rooms."

Walking back out onto the court they stopped in front of the pool for a minute to take in the tranquility of the surrounding area and then continued on.

"The second building added was what has now become known as the work building." Janet opened the door and as they walked in, she told Samantha a little more about myofascial techniques. She also pointed out the lecture and classrooms, as well as the individual massage areas. There were private porches leading out of many of the rooms, affording the clients a chance to have their treatments out in the sunlight or moonlight with the weather permitting.

Looking out from one such room, Janet explained that the opposing building, the residential hall, had been the last structure added. It had been built after the reality hit that a resort atmosphere was what the clientele were looking for.

"Gary decided that if that's what his clients expected and needed, then that was what they would get. It almost became a necessity, anyhow, because not only customers, but also therapists come here. The professionals come to both learn the techniques and to experience the effects of a myofascial massage first hand. Being able to stay on the premises only makes it that much easier all around." She smiled in Sam's direction. "That way there is no excuse for being late to class."

"So he houses entire families here?" Samantha didn't see any children running around the grounds and was curious.

"Actually, no. The employee facilities are basically studio apartments, like the one you're staying in . . . small suites with a kitchenette area. They are basically for the single people or couples without kids. This is not really the type of resort where children flourish, unless they're here for treatment. Gary even discourages guests bringing the little ones along, because the atmosphere needs to be one of quiet to help in the healing process." She grinned over at her charge. "And . . . it's a little expensive to bring the kids along just to play in the pool, if you know what I mean."

Samantha hadn't thought much about it before, but looking around at the facility, she would imagine that treatment here would not be conducive to a thin wallet.

The final region that hadn't been explored was where the horses were housed, up near the falls. Janet reiterated her offer to go riding with Samantha when Alex and Gary were working if the blonde wanted company. She explained that the center acreage butted up against a state forest and that the trails were beautiful this time of year.

Samantha thanked the woman for the offer and told her she would definitely keep it in mind.

By the time they were finished with the tour, it was close to 11:00 so they headed back toward what was known by the employees as The Operations building. Janet introduced Samantha to her masseuse, Belinda, and informed the blonde that she would meet up with her again at the spa after her massage was concluded.

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An hour and 15 minutes later Samantha was sitting quietly in the Jacuzzi on the lower level of The Operations building when Janet walked into the sun drenched area. She spotted her charge reclining in the tub with her head against a pillow, and her eyes closed. Upon approaching, Janet coughed slightly so as not to startle the other woman when she spoke.

"So, Samantha, how was your massage?"

Emerald green eyes with a trace of tears looked up at her new friend. "I didn't know it was going to be such an emotional experience."

"I'm sorry." Janet knelt down next to the tub, putting a comforting hand on Samantha's shoulder.

"Oh, no," Samantha corrected the response she was receiving. "It wasn't a bad experience, rather insightful actually. It's just that I wasn't quite prepared as to how deeply cleansing a massage can be."

"Myofascial is actually a little more involved than you run of the mill massage, but I guess that's a indisputable subject at this point. I would have thought Alex would have filled you in a little better on what to expect. I take it you had a bit of an unwinding?"

"You could say that," Samantha sat up straighter and turned to face the pleasant woman who had been her escort throughout the morning. "But Belinda did fill me in a little before the massage began. I thought to myself 'yeah, sure . . . I'm going to move involuntarily and begin replaying memories and emotional stresses.' I figured she was talking about people who had real problems, not someone like me. But . . . she was definitely talking about me. I started moving and then all of a sudden I was sobbing."

"But how did you feel afterward?"

"Actually, I felt relieved. I remember reliving a confrontation with my Dad that had occurred years ago. I had totally blocked it from my memory, but I guess I was holding onto the emotional scars that the argument left me with. I had stormed out of the house that night without even saying goodbye to my mother and didn't contact them for over three days. It was the first time I ever talked back to my father. I remember feeling guilty, and like I was an evil child. Belinda told me I had the option to continue on, letting everything come back to me and then letting it all go, or that I could stop and my body would continue to hold on to the old pain. I decided to do the former." Again her eyes were filling with tears that trickled down her face and into the small pool.

"How do you feel now, Samantha?"

"Good, but there is still a small splinter in my heart where that wound is trying to heal. Belinda said sometimes it takes more than one treatment to relieve the body and mind of all the old garbage that accumulates throughout the years."

"She's very good at what she does Samantha and she does know her craft."

"Oh, you are definitely right, there, my friend. She has the fingers of an angel." Samantha got up from the warm liquid and Janet handed her the towel that was lying beside the Jacuzzi.

"It's almost one, if you want I'll wait and walk you back to the dining room. I don't think we're going to have time for any riding today, but we can take a look at the horses after lunch if you want?"

"I've never been much of a horseback rider, but I do think the animals are beautiful. If you don't mind, I would rather put off visiting the stables until tomorrow?"

"No problem, Samantha."



"Janet, I was wondering if there was a computer on the premises that I could use, while Alex was busy with Gary?"

"Sure . . . actually there's a laptop you could take up to your suite if you'd like."

"Oh, that would be fantastic! I'd like to take it out on the deck and maybe do a little writing while Alex is working."

"You're a writer, Samantha?"

"More of a wannabe right now. But my dream is to someday be a published author."

The other woman laughed, "And we could say you started your first novel right here at the Center for Healing on the Rocks."

"Stranger things have happened," Samantha laughed.

By now the women were in the changing room and Samantha started to get her clothes out of the locker. "Listen, Janet, I can find my way back to the dining room. Why don't you go ahead and do whatever else it is you need to do today; we can plan on meeting again in the morning?"

"That sounds like a good idea, Samantha. Tell you what, I'll have one of the guys take the computer up to your suite and put it on the table. It will be there when you get finished with lunch."

As the employee started for the exit, Samantha thanked her for the grand tour and for getting a computer for her to use.

Looking back over her shoulder, Janet warned Samantha that it looked like it might be time for the almost daily afternoon shower.

"Almost daily?" Samantha asked.

"Yeah, when the weather is like this it seems that once a day we have a small thunder storm. Sometimes it lasts only a minute or two and sometimes works itself up into a fury. Looks like it might be a combination of the two today." She smiled at her new friend and gave a short wave as she exited the locker room.

Samantha was feeling relaxed both physically and emotionally, as she finished dressing and started back toward the residential building. Walking through the courtyard, the blonde noticed that a small dark cloud covering had, indeed, begun to surround the tip of the red rock encircling the complex. Looking up she decided that running might be the best course of action if she wanted to avoid getting caught out when the rain began falling.

She made it halfway through the courtyard when the rain started to drizzle down from the heavens, causing her to run even faster, as it was now inevitable that she was going to get wet. *So much for sitting in the sun and writing!*

Thunder clapped and small ripples dimpled the pool's water as she hurried by, cursing Zeus for the bolts she knew would follow. *By the Gods I hate that sound.* A sharp crackling sound split the air and Samantha turned, looking up in time to see a hot white streak flash across the dark sky, in the direction of the red-rock mountain. *There is beauty even in that destructive energy.* The small blonde was caught between fascination and fear. Her father had scared the daylight out of her when she was very young, telling horrible tales of people being victimized by storms as electricity sizzled from the Heavens to the earth below.

The doors to the residential building were finally within reach, and as she placed a hand on each of the knobs, another clap of thunder resounded, causing her to cringe. *It must be the rock structures that cause that vibrating echo.*

Finally pulling the doors open she stepped inside. Through the eyes of the poet within she now viewed the weather from a safe alcove. *The cooling liquid played on the sweltering sidewalk, losing its essence and becoming steam, rising back into the air, trying to return to the clouds from whence it had just fallen.* She stood at the door and watched as just as suddenly as the storm had brewed, it ceased, leaving a rainbow floating gently over the waterfalls directly in her line of vision. Within minutes all traces of the storm had completely vanished and no one would have ever known that it even rained. *This very well might be a grand place to begin my writing again.*

Samantha turned away from the now refreshed courtyard and started down the hallway to meet up with Alex and Gary.

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A joyful sound greeted her ears as the petite woman entered the dining room. It was Alex's lilting laughter, and it was music to her ears. Glancing around the room it was easy to spot the two old friends; they sat and chatted over at a corner table, while waiting for Sam to arrive, seemingly oblivious to the mini-storm that had just visited the area.

"Well, it doesn't sound as though it is business the two of you are discussing." Samantha mentioned as she neared the table. "I don't believe I've ever heard anyone laugh like that over figures and budgets."

"Good afternoon to you, too, Samantha." Alex motioned for Samantha to sit next to her and then leaned over and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Tell me you had a fantastic morning."

"I had a fabulous morning thanks to Gary's choice of guides." She turned and faced her host. Thank you, Gary. Janet is very proud to be associated with this center, and it shows in the way she talks about how much the establishment has grown since first being opened. And Belinda," Samantha winked at Gary and then turned toward Alex. "I think we ought to bring her home with

us as a personal masseuse." She was finding it extremely difficult to keep a straight face and still try to figure out the confusing expression she was receiving from her lover.

Finally Samantha broke down laughing. "I'm only kidding with you Alex. Can't you tell?"

"Yeah, sure," was the slurred response from the raven-haired beauty. "In a pig's eye, we'll bring Belinda home with us. Gary, what were you thinking?" She mentally chastised herself for not finding out ahead of time who her friend had chosen to give Samantha the massage.

"Alex, I thought you'd be pleased; she's the best myofascial operator in the Center."

"I already know that . . . but you . . ."

"Alex if you're going where I think you are with that line of questioning, I think it's time to stop," Samantha interrupted, then quickly tried changing the subject. "I don't know about anyone else sitting at this table, but I'm starving!"

"Here, here for the blonde," Gary chimed in, avoiding the icy cold stare from the executive sitting across the table from him. "I'm starved, also. Let's eat."

Feeling very much out numbered Alex pouted slightly, and when she found that it wasn't getting any attention, she opened her menu and stared at the writing without really seeing it. *He shouldn't have given her to Belinda; he knows what a tease she is! AND he knows our background. I had no idea she was still working here, but I guess I should have figured she wouldn't leave such a cushy job.* Alex had every intention of giving Gary an earful as soon as they went back to work, but until she got a chance to talk to him, there was no sense ruining a perfectly good luncheon.

While waiting for the arrival of their food, Samantha discussed in detail the thunderstorm that just finished brewing and spilling over onto the countryside beyond the doors of the building.

"That's a fairly common occurrence during this kind of weather." Gary informed the small blonde.

"Janet said the exact same thing." Samantha informed him. "She mentioned that every day when the weather is warm like this there is a small thunder storm. It was difficult to believe that it could get so dark and scary, and then in only a few minutes be completely sunny again."

"Legend has it that Fighting Eagle, an Indian chief, who lived in these parts, made a vow on his death bed to get even with the white man for taking over his territory. He vowed to darken the sky every day when the sun was shining brightly, simply to ruin the white man's perfect weather and then cry tears of salt upon the ground so that the white man's crops would not grow in the surrounding regions. The Indians believe that the salty tears caused the rocks to multiple and become the small structures dotting the entire area. The dying chief also pledged to cry tears of blood for all his people lost at the hands of the white man. The Indians swear that his tears of blood turned the now famous rock formations red. But, Fighting Eagle also promised his people

that the storms would not last long and there that would be a rainbow at the end of each one, to let them know that he was still watching over them.

The telling of the tale reminded Samantha that she was going to attempt some creative writing while they were here. "Gary, Janet told me there was a laptop on the premises that I could use while I was here. I want to thank you for having such an accommodating assistant."

"No problem, Samantha. Do you need to get on the Internet or something?"

"Not really, I thought I'd do a little writing while the two of you are off conniving to make millions." She smiled over at Alex who seemed to be off in a world of her own. "Hey, good looking," she tapped Alex on the leg. "What's up?"

"Up?" Alex raised her eyebrow questioningly. "Nothing's up. Why?"

"You seem a little spacey, like you're not exactly running on all cylinders right now." Samantha smiled warmly and received a rather strained smile in return.

The blonde looked over at Gary and mouthed a question, asking the man if something happened during their business meeting to upset Alex. He simply shook his head 'no.'

"Okay, I get the message, stop whispering about me in front of my face," Alex gave her lover an honest smile, shaking loose the feeling that would have turned her skin a gorgeous lime color had it been able.

Food arrived and further conversation was interspersed with "ummm's and ahhh's" from the famished trio.

Finishing off the final mouthful, Alex asked Samantha what she planned on doing with the next couple of hours while she and Gary tied up some loose ends.

Not realizing how extremely volatile the subject was Samantha replied, "Well . . . Belinda offered to show me the hiking . . ."

"I don't **think** so!" The response was emphatic. Ice blue glances ventured first to Gary and then over to Samantha.

"Gods, Alex, what's the matter with you? Do you have something against Belinda?"

"No! And 'By the Gods' Samantha," the dark-haired woman sarcastically mimicked her lover's favorite saying. "Neither will you!"

Now it was the blonde's turn to raise her voice. Everyone in the dining room was trying to nonchalantly act as if nothing were happening, which was a small feat, seeing how the owner of the establishment was sitting there turning red, while the two women sitting with him were obviously arguing.

"I refuse to sit here and have you yell at me when I have no earthly idea what set you off!" The blonde violently pushed her chair away from the table and rose to leave.

Alex grabbed the smaller woman's wrist and jerked it a little rougher than she had anticipated.

"Alex!" It was the first verbalization the man had interspersed into the conversation but it got the attention of both the women. "Don't make a scene . . . please."

She dropped Samantha's arm and put both her hands up in the air, shaking her head, in a gesture of surrender.

Samantha didn't wait for Alex to speak, but raced from the room, hot tears burning a path in her normally smiling face.

The executive was now furious and her eyes were boring a hole through Gary as he sat glued to his chair.

"Now see what you've done?" Alex growled.

"What I've done? See what I've done?" He tried his damndest to keep his voice down to an astonished mumble.

"What the fuck did you think you were doing, letting Belinda give Samantha her massage?"

"Alex she's the best therapist I have on site, I think you know that," Gary answered extremely on the defensive.

"Do you have Alzheimer's or are you just stupid!"

"Do I what . . . oh shit . . ." A light bulb visibly went off in Gary's eyes. "Yes . . . of course . . . I'm stupid! Damn it Alex it's been years!"

"Lifetimes would not be enough. You had to have HER give my lover a massage!"

"Let's take this outside, Alex." Gary started to get up, but felt a strong hand on his shoulder pushing him back down into his seat.

In a much calmer, controlled voice, Alex acknowledged, "I've got to go upstairs and explain to Samantha what this explosion was all about. I can't talk with you about this now. We accomplished quite a bit this morning, what with the ordering the wall and deciding how to expand the building to encompass it. Because you had already talked to the manufacturer, it should only take until Friday to get it here and pretty much get it assembled. I think it would be fair to say we've put in a good day and that we can make up the extra time tomorrow if need be?" Alex definitely had her temper under control. Her voice was now back to her usual deep, calm tone and the small hairs on the back of Gary's neck were finally beginning to stop sending that horrible prickling feeling to his skin.

He looked into her startling blue eyes that were now not showing a trace of the fury she had just finished displaying. Alexis Dorian was absolutely a woman to be reckoned with and not one on whose bad side anyone wanted to get. He could have kicked himself for thinking that she would have forgotten about Belinda, even though it had been almost seven years ago, when the Center was still in its infancy stage that the two women first met. It had been two years after that, when the mild-mannered man saw for the first time the raven-haired beauty's temper, and he vowed that he would never be on the receiving end of her rage. Today he almost was.

"You go ahead and take care of that little towhead of yours. She doesn't deserve to be in the middle of this, Alex. I'm sorry about Belinda, it was not done maliciously."

"I know, Gary. It's just that she is such a tease and troublemaker. If she knew Samantha was mine . . . well . . ." Smiling coyly, she looked over at her friend, arching her eyebrow she finished the statement he was reluctant to assume was insincere. "I would hate to have to kill her and bury her out on that damn hiking trail of yours."

With a wave of his hand he dismissed his friend and she graciously whispered, "I'm sorry" into his ear, before grinning and nodding sheepishly to the patrons as she exited the room.

The elevator ride was agonizingly long as she mulled over in her mind how she was going to explain her actions to Samantha. Finally deciding that honesty was the best way out, she took a deep breath and opened the door to their suite.

The curtains had all been closed, and the darkness gave an uneasy chill to what should have been a sunlit room. Alex looked around and noticed that the bedroom door was conspicuously closed. As she approached the room she could hear a faint sniffing coming from inside. Instead of opening the door, the now apologetic woman went around to the kitchen and got down two wineglasses. A bottle of Merlot was on the counter, so she quietly searched the drawers for the opener. Feeling like an absolute jerk she poured the wine and then walked over to the bedroom door.

Not bothering to knock or speak, she opened the door and walked in, placing the glasses on one of the bedside tables. The petite figure draped diagonally across the bed made no attempt to acknowledge the dark-haired woman's presence, but Alex noticed that the sniffing had been stifled.

"Honey, I'm so sorry." It was the only thing she could initially think of to say to break the silence that filled the room. There was no answer from the small blonde.

One long slender arm reached over and a strong hand was placed on Samantha's shoulder. Sam pulled back slightly from the touch.

"Samantha don't . . . please . . . Give me a chance to explain."

"A chance to explain?" Samantha turned over, and green machetes cut through the silent room on their way to her lover's face. "A chance to explain why you made a fool of me in front of Gary

and all the people in the dining room? Alex what **could** you have been thinking? Do you know how embarrassed I was? How frightened I was of the person you were turning into down there? Who in Tartarus was that person grabbing my wrist?"

"Samantha give me a chance . . . "

"Go on . . . explain . . . but let me warn you . . . this had better be good, Alex, because I don't intend for our relationship to continue on a physically abusive level. I will not be handled like a piece of meat!"

She rolled back over trying to stay the tears that involuntarily were again flooding down her face.

"Please don't cry Samantha. Listen, my temper got the best of me and I'm really sorry. I had no right to treat you the way I did downstairs. You usually bring out the very best in me, but when I feel there might be a chance of losing you or someone taking advantage of you, the old Alex comes out and takes over. I'm still learning to control my anger. I told you that Nikki and I physically fought, and I don't ever want us to go that route. I just couldn't have you walking out on me."

Now it was Alex's turn to weep. Samantha could hear the tears in her lover's voice but knew if she turned to glimpse the reality of the liquid emotion running unashamedly down Alex's face, she would melt into the tall woman's arms and kiss the offending tears away. The small blonde instead kept her face down on the bed, listening to the anguish in the voice of the other half of her soul.

"It was almost seven years ago, not long after Gary first bought the land and had the initial building built. Belinda was one of his early groupies. She followed him around when he was doing the therapy circuit and teaching physical therapists about his myofascial techniques. She had been a certified massage therapist but wanted to go further with her business, so she started taking classes and listening to lectures. When he built this Center, she was the first employee he hired, after Janet. I was here quite often during the first few years, encouraging and helping him to get everything he needed to get this Center off the ground. I was footloose and fancy free as the saying goes, and Belinda and I hit it off pretty good. Gary introduced us . . . we talked . . . she showed me what he had taught her . . . it turned into . . . an affair."

Now she had the small blonde's total attention. Alex saw the change in Samantha's body language as soon as she said the word 'affair.' At least she knew Samantha was listening.

"I know this probably is not the most pleasant of conversations, Samantha, but the only way to explain to you what just happened downstairs, is to explain what happened then. Belinda and I were like Snow White and Rose Red we were opposites in almost every way. You wouldn't have liked me much back then, Honey. The displays of emotion like the one that took place in dining room were a common occurrence. I had no check whatsoever on my temper and my desires kept me fueled. I had many names, none of them complimentary: Blue Ice, Lilith (in the sense of insubordinate to man), Dalia, and of course the old standby 'Bitch.'

Samantha turned over and sat up, looking with incredulous eyes at the woman who had captured her heart. "You hate the woman because you once loved her?"

Alex's face held the contrition Samantha suspected it would and as she had already anticipated, her own anger melted when she saw the path that the dried tears had left on her lover's face.

"No Samantha I don't hate her for that." She reached for the smaller woman's hand and this time, Samantha didn't pull away.

"We never tried to fool ourselves into thinking what we had was going to last. Belinda wanted a life here in Sedona, and I was constantly on the road with Have It All. At first I tried to talk her into moving to California or traveling with me, but she kept telling me that the pace was too fast; she wanted a simpler lifestyle. I couldn't conceive of not being close to the bars and the city, and she couldn't imagine leaving the country. We actually parted friends, or so I thought."

Alex stopped and took a sip of her wine, offering the other glass to Samantha who smiled shyly, commenting that it was a little early to be imbibing, but she took it anyway, drank a little and handed it back to Alex to put on the table.

"So, I assume something happened to change the relationship from friends to enemies?" Samantha snuggled up closer to the uncomfortable looking woman sitting on the edge of the bed. This couldn't be an easy story to tell and her putting distance between them could only make the telling even more awkward. "Go on, Alex," she prompted as she put her head on her lover's chest and her arms around Alex's waist, "I'm listening."

The strong fingers that had minutes ago held Samantha's small wrist in a death grip, now gently laced their way through the silken gold of the smaller woman's hair, making the task of confession slightly more palatable.

"Almost two and a half years after Belinda and I broke up, I brought Nikki with me on a business trip to see Gary. He was adding machines to the center and wanted me to come look at where he was placing them and bring his people up to par on the new equipment. I thought it would be an ideal time to take a mini-vacation . . . "

"Ahhhh, a mini-vacation. Should I be jealous that you've brought someone here before me?" Samantha stared up into soft blue eyes that had a faraway gleam in them.

Brought out of her reverie, Alex gently chided, "Samantha please, this is difficult enough."

"Sorry."

"Anyhow, I brought Nikki here and we, as usual, were not in the best of spirits with each other. It was obvious the honeymoon was over, even on a vacation. I thought getting her an unwinding would settle some of her emotional and physical problems, and then thought we might still be able to work on our relationship."



Digressing from the tale she brought herself back to the present. "By the way, Samantha, Gary was right when he said Belinda is the best therapist he has here; she's competent, experienced, and has very healing hands. I hear she now goes with him on his teaching conferences and helps train as well as doing the actual hands-on."

She had purposefully gotten off the painful train of thought, but she needed to bring this little confessional to a close. Gently kissing the soft locks in front of her she wrapped her arms around Samantha and drew the smaller woman in close. "You know I love you, don't you Samantha?" The question was almost a plea.

The blonde looked up and put her hands on either side of her dark angel's face. "More than life, my soul, more than life." Sam tenderly kissed the full lips that could melt her heart with a simple smile. "Finish, Alex, I'm sure you're almost done."

"Yes," the dark head shook in the affirmative, and her blue eyes glistened from the return of emotions that again prompted tears. She hated it when the past infiltrated into the present. There were so many stages in her life Samantha need not experience first hand, she had hoped this to be one of them, but it hadn't played out in her favor. Sighing deeply she continued.

"Okay, without going into all the grim details . . . I set up an appointment for Nikki with Belinda. I had absolutely no trepidations about doing so and that, my love, was my waterloo. It seemed as though the grey-eyed masseuse held quite a reservoir of anger over the demise of our relationship. On the surface she was as sweet as ever, her smile belying what she actually felt."

Alex hated re-enacting the scenario from so many years gone by, and elaboration seemed to stay her from actually getting to the meat of the deception. Again a sigh and again Samantha held her lover close, knowing that this was a torturous memory to give voice to.

"As usual I was spending the day with Gary and we were supposed to meet up with Nikki for lunch - seems like today was a touch of *déjà vu* - Nikki was absolutely glowing when she came to the table. I thought it was just from a relaxing massage, but she wasn't meeting my eyes when I spoke to her. After lunch we went for a walk and I asked how the treatment went. She avoided the subject, pointing out that the falls were beautiful and changing the subject to something else superficial that has now slipped by my memory. I remember grabbing her and spinning her around to face me. One of her downfalls was that she couldn't lie to me. I asked what happened when she was with Belinda and her brown eyes first teared and then turned angry. She told me that it was my fault for leaving her in the clutches of such a temptress."

Alex repositioned, so as to look into Samantha's face. She hoped that looking into the innocent face of her lover might somehow soften the climax to the story she was unfolding.

"Samantha, I received far more information that day than my emotions needed. Nikki went into unrestrained detail, beginning with the tenderness of Belinda's touch and ending with the seduction at the end of the treatment session. I didn't see red - I saw a swirling fury of purple! I lost all conscious control over my actions and went flying out of the room in search of the bitch who dared to touch what was mine; it didn't matter that I was beginning to wonder if I really

loved Nikki. I didn't bother to ask how Nikki felt or why she responded to the attention. I really didn't care. I wanted revenge on the person who had violated me!"

As the memories spewed from her lover's lips, Samantha watched in awe the gentle face of her beloved change to that of a raving lunatic. The blonde had seen Alex angry, jealous, and protective before, but through the confrontations she had witnessed, Alex's face had never taken on the dimensions it was taking on now, while she relived this tale of jealousy gone maniacal.

The new tears, streaming down the angular features of the raven-haired beauty's face, were those of remembered hate and loss of control, of shame mixed with torturous guilt. The despair that was slowly surfacing was breaking Samantha's heart. She quickly closed the gap between them and put a hand up to her dark angel's mouth. "Hush, my love, you don't need to finish. I really do understand."

Alex took the hand and gently kissed each loving finger as she shook her head 'no.'

"I'm sure you do, my Destiny, but this is one story I need to finish now, so I never have to complete it again."

"Really Alex, I . . . "

"Samantha . . . please . . . "

The blonde sat back reluctantly and allowed the dark-haired woman to continue.

Having regained her composure, the story flowed to finish without the return of tears. "I reached Belinda's quarters with Nikki close behind me. The only reason she had fallen behind was because she had stopped to get Gary, knowing that the masseuse was in grave danger. I reached the door and without knocking turned the knob. Honestly, Samantha, I think a locked door was all that saved her that evening. I banged on the door and by the time she opened it, Nikki was at my back. I got in one good kick to the stomach and fist to the face, before Nikki and Gary jumped me from behind. With Nikki joining in the fight against me, I lost all desire to continue. I ran out the door and back to our suite. Only later did I learn that Gary was the one who talked Belinda out of filing assault charges against me. I guess that was the beginning of the end of my relationship with Nikki."

It was the first time Samantha ever looked into Alex's normally brilliant baby blues and instead saw a slightly ash blue color. She smiled sweetly at Alex and took her hand. "Okay, now I know the entire story, and I can see why you got upset this afternoon . . . "

"If she touched you Samantha . . . I'm not sure you should tell me . . . I'm afraid I'd kill her this time."

Samantha searched her lover's eyes and face and found no trace of a smile. "Alex people change, they grow - you have - sort of." She smiled broadly trying to entice the raven-haired beauty to do

the same. When that didn't work she tried a small explanation of the conversation she had with the therapist.

"Actually, Alex, she does know that I'm with you; Janet told her. Her knowing that we are lovers made conversation between us a little easier. She informed me that a few years back she returned to school to become a physical therapist. While studying for her degree, she met the woman who is now her lover. They have a small house on the outskirts of town. Belinda showed no animosity toward you, Alex."

Alex remained sitting with her head down and silent, lost somewhere in time and memory. Samantha reached over and picked up the wineglasses. She handed one to the solemn woman sitting next to her and then took a sip or two from her own. Alex had taken the glass without saying a word and now began drinking the warm red liquid.

The silence was deafening.

Not knowing how to break the unnatural muteness of her partner, the blonde fidgeted on the bed as she drank her wine and looked over at the clock on the nightstand. It was already 4:00. *Damn, time flies when you're having fun!* She thought sarcastically.

"So, where do we go from here?" Alex whispered.

The question was uttered so quietly that Samantha was not truly sure her ears had heard anything. "Did you say something, Alex?"

"Yes." Alex answered, finally looking into her lover's eyes with her own light blue eyes looking paler than the smaller woman sitting next to her had ever seen them. "I asked where we went from here, Samantha? I don't know what else to do but apologize and promise that I will continue working on keeping my temper in tow. It's simply that the thought of anyone touching you, other than me, gets my blood to boiling."

"Alex, I am not going to get myself into a position where someone is going to manhandle or womanhandle me. What we have here is an obvious lack of your trusting that I can handle myself. It also seems to me that you don't believe that I have no desire to let anyone but You touch me romantically, or rotically as Mom so aptly puts it." Again she tried reaching her heart-mate though levity.

The smile, that could make Samantha's pulse quicken, finally appeared on Alex's face. The small blonde reached out a hand and drew the woman she loved close. With Alex's head on her chest she gently stroked the dark hair, running her fingers through it slowly as she tenderly kissed the ebony crown. For the first time since their relationship had started Samantha felt as though she were the stronger of the two. She hated seeing her hero so vulnerable, yet on the other hand it allowed her insight into the psyche of the many faceted person she had fallen so deeply in love with.

"I love you with my entire being; you know that don't you?" Samantha whispered into her lover's ear.

"You had better, Samantha Renee Riley. No one else in this world would have me, and I am so in need of you." Glistening eyes gazed up into emerald pools of affection.

It was an odd sensation, the small woman leaning down to kiss the tender lips of her beloved where she was usually the one reaching toward the sky. They melded together, and had wishes been easily granted, the two would have merged forever.

Alex's arms tightened around Samantha's body and the smaller woman began running her hands down her lover's back.

"You know, Alex we started something this morning that never did get finished? Do you really have to go back to work today?"

"As a matter of fact, No. I told Gary when I left him at the table that I'd see him in the morning." Sitting back she looked into Samantha's questioning face. "Yes, I apologized to him before I came up here. Seems like I've been doing a lot of that lately."

"PMS?"

"No!"

"Could be, it's just about . . . "

The remainder of the sentence was cut off by a passionate kiss, as the taller woman repositioned herself and then maneuvered her lover on top of her. With fluid dexterity she removed Samantha's top and bra, then with her hands under the slight woman's arms she pulled her forward until a firm breast dangled enticingly at mouth level. Alex allowed her tongue to play damply around the puckering nipple that hung suspended above her lips, before opening her mouth and engulfing the morsel before her.

Groans of desire resounded from both women as Alex slid her hands down to Samantha's waist, then continued further down the slim body removing shorts and panties. Samantha helped with her legs to get the clothing all the way off and then focused her attention on ridding Alex of hers.

Minutes later the two were lying naked side-by-side, simultaneously touching and caressing each other.

"I'm going to turn over a new leaf, Samantha," Alex began.

"No more talk, Alex," Samantha pleaded.

"You're positively right," Alex agreed and all conversation was immediately halted.

One long leg moved toward and in between two shorter legs, as Alex's thigh rubbed against an already swollen bud hidden by a mound of soft golden curls. She positioned Samantha beneath her and placed a hand between the golden and the ebony curls, teasingly fondling the heat of Samantha's passion, before sliding her entire body down the smaller one and placing her eager tongue where her leg and fingers had been just seconds before.

"Mine." It was the only word that was distinguishable as she licked the love juice from the area and then sucked gently at the swollen protuberance. "Tell me, my Destiny, tell me it's mine and mine alone."

"It's yours Alex," Samantha breathed fitfully between gasps and moans.

Flicking back and forth the raven-haired beauty's tongue played among the soft wet folds and back to the bud, faster and harder, until Samantha, her hands on Alex's head, began to push the taller woman away, screaming in ecstasy that she needed relief before she exploded.

"But I want you to explode, Samantha." Sapphire gems flashed mischievously, as she looked up from her place of power, refusing to relinquish her hold until she knew her lover had gone beyond the point of orgasm.

Then the brunette opened her mouth wide and covered Samantha's moist nether lips. Her tongue continued its search until begging and receiving entrance to the cave of desire, she found herself deep within her lover's body. With a ravenous appetite she proceeded to plunge in as far as possible, then stop and explore the surrounding territory, while listening to half-uttered words from somewhere above her head. Her mouth filled with Samantha, she mumbled again, "Tell me Samantha. Tell me who all this belongs to."

"Ah . . . Alex . . . oh . . . Alex . . . "

"Who?" The brunette licked as she pulled her tongue out. "Who?" She queried again as the long, soft organ found its way back into the cave.

"You . . . you . . . p-l-e-a-s-e . . . "

Turning her own body without missing a beat she straddled Samantha's face. Her own passion inches away from her lover's mouth.

Two small hands began by circling Alex's swollen nub, but the brunette refused to allow the hands to bring the mound down to mouth level.

"Alex stop teasing," Samantha finally implored. "Stop fighting me."

Smiling the taller woman slowly lowered herself down onto her lover's face, shivering at the first soft touch, as Samantha's tongue zealously began lapping at the elixir of love, dripping from between Alex's nether lips.

"You taste so sweet," the blonde mumbled with her mouth full of her heart's desire.

Concentration became a challenge, as each of the women was lost between satisfying and being satisfied. Finally in unison they came, Alex with her tongue inside Samantha and Samantha with her tongue inside Alex.

Alex could feel the supple walls trembling as the spasms began. For a minute she held her position, enjoying both her own sensations and those of her lover. Then she smiled and removed her tongue, replacing it with one . . . two . . . three fingers. Pulling away from a determined Samantha, she turned, now straddling the smaller woman's thigh again. She immersed her fingers deep inside, where Samantha was still occasionally shuddering. When deep inside she splayed her fingers, filling the cavity completely. Passionate kisses covered Samantha's mouth, with each of the women tasting her own sweetness on the lips of the other. Long, skillful fingers continued moving powerfully in a give-and-take motion, causing the blonde to quickly succumb to another orgasm, while Alex rode to climax almost at the same moment.

Happily soaked with perspiration and the sweet smell of love, Alex fell limply beside Samantha. With her hand still inside her lover, she knew that she could stay there for hours and never tire of the feelings that lingered after making love to the other half of her soul. She smiled, joyously savoring the quivering after shocks still coursing through her lover's body.

When Alex finally removed her hand and the silence was broken, it was Samantha who first spoke. "Alex do you know how special you make me feel?"

"As special as you are?"

"I'm serious, Alex."

"So am I. You, Samantha, are the most important thing in my life. I know I can be a tyrant, and I'm sorry. I'm trying . . ." She looked at the blonde, "No smart ass remark," she smiled. "As I said, I'm trying to imagine that you can love me as much as I love you. It's a difficult concept to believe, but I am getting closer to believing it."

"Well you had best know pretty damn soon." Samantha gave her lover a peck on the cheek.

"So, do you think we made up for what didn't happen this morning?"

"Oh, I would positively say that we probably did a little better than we would have this morning." Samantha placed an elbow on the bed and propped her head on one hand. "I hate to be the one to change the subject, my love, but I think I'm hungry again."

Alex rolled onto her back laughing. "But of course you are, my Destiny." She looked over at the radio and saw that it was almost 6 o'clock.

"Listen, if we take a quick . . . and I do mean quick shower . . . we could probably make it to at least one of the stores I want to show you and then go have dinner. You up for shopping?"

"Always," the small blonde responded. "You know Alex, I think we did our own little imitation of Sedona weather this afternoon. You produced a small storm in the dining room, but hey, the air cleared and now it's time for the sun to come back out and rule the sky. Just let's not have you following suit and doing that on a daily basis, agreed?"

"Absolutely!" Samantha's Princess Charming rolled off the bed and grabbed her life-mate, pulling her up and onto the floor. "Only you would think of my outrageous actions as a midday storm, my love, and compare my bad temper to an act of nature." She kissed Samantha tenderly then whispered in her ear. "Come on, let's get ready and go see a little of this mystical town."

Continued in Part 9.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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### ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## Part 9

Chapter 9 (Tues. 6:00 p.m.)

The women agreed that for them to get in and out of the shower in record time, they would have to agree only to wash themselves. Not that there weren't occasional pats or touches throughout the short washing session, but none such as to deter them from getting to at least one store before all the doors and sidewalks in Sedona were locked up tight for the evening.

Dressing was also a casual affair, with Alex grabbing her camping shorts and Samantha a pair of skorts. In approximately 30 minutes, the two women were down by the Jeep and ready to escape the serenity of the small resort for the earthy beauty of the little town of Sedona.

"The store I want to take you to I'm sure is open until 9:00 so do you want to go there first or eat first, Samantha?"

"I think shop first, then we can take our time with dinner," green eyes teased and an impish grin spread across the otherwise heavenly face as Samantha got into the passenger side of the Jeep. "How far away is the town, Alex?"

"It's not far at all; this still a rather small community, probably around 16,000 people by now, which leaves it in the small town bracket in my book, especially when you compare it to cities in California. But you should have seen it seven years ago, Samantha; it has grown a lot since then.

They wound their way through the back roads until Alex pulled the Jeep onto Highway 89A and steered toward one of the mini-shopping areas.

"Like I told you before, most of the trade is in art, Indian crafts, and New Age, metaphysical products, such as crystals, aromatherapy and massage therapy candles and oils, handcrafted jewelry, and unusual musical instruments. There's a large metaphysical community here and even a couple fairly famous psychics reside just outside of town."

"Wow, psychics . . . maybe we'll get a chance to go to one."

"Most of them have appointments scheduled six months to a year in advance."

"Okay then, what do you mean unusual musical instruments?"

"Like the flute that Kokopelli uses," Alex smiled over at her lover. "Hand made wooden flutes, drums, shakers, and ceramic instruments like the ocarina . . ."

"The ocarina? What in Tartarus is an ocarina?" Samantha looked at Alex like she was talking a foreign language.

"You're kidding me, right?" The dark-haired woman laughed at the thought that her lover had no idea what she was talking about. "I thought every child owned at least one ocarina. "

"Guess I was deprived, but that's no reason to keep me in the dark now."



"Well, it's small and roundish in shape, although some are shaped like animals, sea creatures, etc. Anyhow they have holes in them like flutes and are super easy to play . . . and . . . I'll just show you one because we're here already and they have them inside." She pulled into a parking space and turned off the car. "Okay, let's go play in the toy shop, little girl." She opened the door and got out, but before she could get around to Samantha's side, the blonde was coming around the Jeep toward her. Alex shook her head and took her lover's hand.

"You're gonna love this place."

The outside of the building blended perfectly with the landscape. It was a huge redwood building the color of which matched that of the red rocks surrounding it. Alex opened the door and allowed Samantha to enter first. There was a serene atmosphere to the incense filled air as the two walked into a huge room filled entirely with crystals and gems of all colors and sizes.

"I've never seen so many crystals together at the same time," Samantha professed as she looked around the room in awe.

"It's quite impressive, and it's grown since the last time I was here." Alex walked beside her mate as Samantha fingered and eyed the enormous variety of crystals and gems.

"I never knew there were so many varieties of quartz, Alex," Samantha confessed as she picked up several pieces.

Watching as her lover ran her fingers over the different gems, Alex began to notice that Samantha's complexion seemed to be taking on a rosy color as she stood amongst the large crystals near the back of the room. She walked over to the smaller woman and put a hand on her waist.

"Are you feeling okay, Samantha? Maybe we should go eat dinner first and then see if we have time to come back?"

"No, I'll be fine; I just feel a little light headed and warm. Does the room feel warm to you, Alex?" It was at this point that the blonde seemed to sway a little. "I think maybe I just need a little air; it seems awfully close in here all of a sudden."

The dark-haired woman looked around the room for a chair and finding one, walked with a now shaky Samantha over to it. One of the clerks came in from the other room and asked if there was anything she could help them with, but before she finished her question, she also noticed the now red-faced woman sitting in the corner of the room.

Addressing Alex she suggested that Samantha be taken outside for a minute. Not needing to be told twice, Alex picked Samantha up this time and carried her out to the parking lot.

"I think that clerk was right, Hon," Alex agreed as she put Samantha's feet on the ground but kept a steady arm around the smaller woman's waist. "A little fresh air might be all you need."

The clerk was directly behind the two women and she approached Samantha with an outstretched hand, offering her a small blue-green stone.

"This is Amazonite," she informed Samantha as she handed her the gem. "I believe you are having a reaction to the high frequency vibrations in the crystal room. You must have a lot of healing power or psychic ability for the gems to have affected you so quickly."

Samantha's eyes got as big as saucers as the woman continued on about the gem she placed in the blonde's hand.

"The specimen I just gave you is a balancing stone; it's especially good for people born under the sign of Virgo . . . "

"I'm a Virgo," Samantha interrupted, looking intently at the object in her hand.

"Well, then that should work doubly good for you. You see it balances out the yin/yang energies in the body. I believe you were inundated back there in the crystal room; you must be very sensitive to the earth's vibrations. Would it be too presumptuous if I asked to look at your palms?"

Samantha glanced over at Alex and the dark-haired woman simply smiled and nodded a slight affirmative to her lover.

Turning back to the clerk, Samantha opened her palms and let them be examined by the intent lady standing in front of her.

"No wonder the crystals affected you so strongly. Look here." The woman pointed to a section of Samantha's right palm where lines crossed creating an unusual design.

Drawing Alex's attention now as well, the skeptic walked over closer to Samantha and the saleswoman.

"This is a psychic cross. Do you have dreams that sometimes come true? Or do you have hunches that more often than not are correct?"

"Yeah," Samantha mumbled, feeling a little intimidated. "That means something?"

"It just means that you should listen more often to your inner voices because there is a lot of the psychic in you. If you were to study a little you could probably get quite good at it."

"Okay," Alex butted in. "She's really new at this kind of stuff, let's not get carried away with . . ."

"Alex, you were the one who brought me here, remember. There was probably a reason for it."

"Samantha I just don't want you getting overly excited about something that might never . . ."

"Excuse me," the saleswoman interrupted looking directly at Alex. "She does seem to be very vulnerable to the crystals. But listen, I didn't come out here to start a family argument. I'll leave you two to look around." She turned back around to Samantha. "If you continue to hold that gem in your hand, you won't feel the vibration of the crystals as strongly or get as lightheaded. You should be okay in the room with that in your hand. Enjoy the store and if there's anything you need help with let me know." With that the woman went back inside and left the lovers to decide what to do next.

"Alex that was a little rude." Samantha gently chided.

"It's just that some of these people get a little over zealous. I didn't want her scaring you with all that psychic ability nonsense."

"Are you certain you're the daughter of Aurora Dorian?" Green eyes sparkled as the fair-haired woman smiled up at her mate.

"Okay, you made your point. It's just that it's so easy to go overboard in these places."

"But Alex I almost passed out in there, even you noticed the color change in my face."

"I stand corrected. It must be my fate to be surrounded by people who walk around with their heads in the clouds. The more I think about it, the more I'm sure I fell in love with my mother!" Giving Samantha a hug Alex turned her around to face the front door.

"All right, consider yourself armed - now let's go back inside and see what catches your eye."

Instead of staying in the crystal area they continued on to the back of the room and through the door which opened up into another large chamber. What greeted the two women was a potpourri of New Age products. Incense pleased the olfactory senses, while stained glass spilled colored light throughout the room as prisms danced off tables, windows and hanging lamps. Alex took Samantha by the hand and walked her over to a section of the room filled with musical instruments.

Picking up a small roundish ceramic object about the size of a young child's fist, she turned to the blonde. "This Samantha is an ocarina." Placing it close to her lips she proceeded to cover a number of the small holes drilled into the object and then blew on the small mouthpiece, actually producing a musical tune.

"That's neat Alex; here let me try."

With a crooked grin on her face, the tall woman handed over the instrument and waited for the results of Samantha's first encounter with the unique tune maker. The first gust of breath produced a high ear splitting tone. Alex laughed and Samantha turned red almost immediately as she handed it back to her lover.

"Damn, Alex, you made it look easy."

"Yeah, well I think I got my first ocarina when I was five and then Kelley made sure I got an instruction booklet so I could learn how to use it properly. When I mastered that Mom went out and bought me a recorder and then a drum." As she named each new instrument, she found a corner of the room, which housed what it was she was talking about and pointed in that direction.

"It must have be fun growing up with Aurora."

"Oh, yeah, a barrel of monkeys. She's the Queen of new and strange. Mom collected weird people like other people collect trading cards, and with the people came all kinds of beliefs, instruments, psychic stuff, you name it."

"It still sounds like fun to me." Samantha insisted.

"You would think that," Alex smiled at her lover and then told her to pick out an instrument she would like to learn to play. She promised to help Samantha with the lessons.

While Sam was busy deciding, Alex walked over to the jewelry section of the room. She asked the woman at the counter if they carried any necklaces made with the Amazonite. The woman brought out a single terminated clear crystal necklace that contained a piece of the requested stone attached with gold wire to the flat end of the crystal, so that the stone would touch the skin. The middle of the crystal had been drilled and a piece of garnet placed in the hole. "I'll take it," Alex told the clerk.

"That's a lovely choice; the Amazonite goes with the throat chakra, the garnet with the heart and the quartz crystal with the all the chakras."

"Guess she'll be able to speak from the heart while wearing this, uh?"

"It would be difficult to do anything less," the clerk agreed.

"Okay, put that aside, please. I'm sure we're not finished shopping around yet."

"It'll be right here when you're ready," the saleslady assured Alex.

Samantha spotted the books, tapes and CDs and was over looking through the collection when Alex came over and put her hands on the smaller woman's shoulders. "Anything interesting?"

Unable to control the excitement in her voice the blonde pointed to one of the table displays. "Look!"

"Uh, huh."

"What do you mean 'uh, huh?' That's your Mother's picture and her collection of Changing Yourself by Changing Your Thoughts. There's the book, the audio book, and the CD. Aren't you excited?"

"Hello, Earth to Samantha. I've lived with the woman all my life. She's been a writer all my life. I've kinda gotten used to seeing her face plastered all over these types of stores." She grinned and squeezed Sam's shoulders as she leaned down and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I love seeing Mom through your eyes, Samantha; it's make it all fresh and new again. Now let's see if there's anything else you want. Did one of the instruments call out to you?"

Samantha held up a royal blue ocarina in the shape of a dolphin.

"Well," Alex smiled. "They didn't make them in that shape when I was growing up." She turned to the saleswoman. "They still electronically tune these so they're pitched, don't they, even when they're shaped like this?" She held up the dolphin for the woman to see.

"Yes ma'am, they're all hand made and then electronically tuned like you said. We only get a few of those dolphins in; they are beautiful, aren't they?"

Alex shook her head yes as she walked over and placed Samantha's new toy next to the necklace. "Would you please get us an instruction booklet for this?" she asked the clerk.

"I'll be happy to and put it here with the rest of your items," the saleslady answered.

"All righty then," Alex replied as she turned back to Samantha. "What do you say to getting a few of the aromatherapy candles for back at the Center? We didn't bring any with us."

"And one of these CDs? This one looks really interesting; it has fairies all over the cover." Samantha held it up and Alex took it from her, handing it to the saleslady to put with the rest of their finds.

"Fairies - you're supposed to buy the CD for the music, Samantha, not for the cover."

"Oh but Alex any recording with a cover like that would simply have to be good."

Alex picked up a small vial of fairy dust and added it to their collection. What good was a fairy CD without the ability to sprinkle fairy dust around while listening to it?

Together they picked out a few candles, a small bottled of scented oil for the Jacuzzi, and a different scent to be used for massage. Samantha insisted they were done shopping but noted that she did want to check out the front room again before they left. She asked Alex if she should find out how much the stone she was holding cost and perhaps purchase it.

"I'll ask, Samantha."

When Alex asked the woman who gave Samantha the Amazonite about the price she was told that it was a gift for the novice psychic. Alex shook her head slightly but remained friendly as she smiled and told the woman thank you from Samantha.

Samantha's Princess Charming paid for their purchases and informed Sam that the Amazonite was hers to keep. "Isn't that something, Alex, the name Amazonite? Kinda brings Wonder Woman to mind. She's an Amazon, right?" Samantha smiled, remembering their first discussion on the topic when Alex explained the stories behind the figures on the stained glass doors at the Center.

"Yes, she is. And an immortal one at that," the dark-haired beauty agreed. "I guess it would remind you of her. Now we have Artemis and Isis on the doors at home and you have the Amazonite, a stone named after Artemis' chosen. Who knows, with that imagination of yours, one of the Goddesses or even Wonder Woman herself might pay us a call. Come on, little Amazon, let's go back out and look at the crystals."

They spent the next half an hour with Samantha learning about all the different gems, stones, and crystals. Her favorite turned out to be lapis lazuli, because of the beautiful blue color. But, she also found out that it enhanced the throat and third eye chakras, as well as enhancing psychic abilities and communications with the higher self. Her second choice was the rutilated quartz with its fine golden strands running throughout the crystal that reminded her of angel hair.

Alex explained that the rutilated stones were known to represent Cupid's arrows tipped with love. Sam was surprised to find out that it was associated with all the chakras and was a very powerful life-force stone, a stone to assist in healing and to help stabilize emotional and physical imbalances. As they passed by each stone, Alex told Samantha to put her favorites into a small basket.

Picking up a piece of tourmalinated quartz with the black tourmaline crystals inside, Alex turned to Samantha. "This crystal helps to balance the male/female polarities - it's kind of like the yin/yang of the crystal world," she told her lover. "The black tourmaline in the clear quartz releases patterns of fear and negativity and encourages peace of heart and mind as well as patience. It's also a very good ground and aids in balancing extremes. I should probably carry a piece of this in my pocket at all times." She smiled at Samantha who immediately agreed with her statement.

Lastly Alex picked up a piece of hematite. "This little beauty energizes and enhances personal magnetism, and courage."

"Ah, ha!" The blonde exclaimed. "Is that what you carried around to make you such a magnetic saleswoman when you worked for Have It All."

"As a matter of fact, Ms Smarty, I do carry a piece of this around and use it as a touchstone." She put the new piece into the basket and asked Samantha if she was finished purchasing the store.

"You were the one who went and got a basket to fill," Samantha responded as she deposited the final article.

"So I was," Alex agreed. "Are you sure you're finished?"

"Quite," Samantha insisted.

"Okay," the raven-haired beauty turned to the saleslady. "I guess we've about completed buying the store."

After the woman added up the total and Alex paid for it, the saleswoman handed Alex a soul-mate crystal. "It's really odd, but this crystal has been sitting on my desk for ages. I always knew I'd kept it for a special reason. It's a twin crystal, as you can see, and the two attached crystals are there to promote contact of a loving nature, communication that is tender, and togetherness. It's an amulet for twin souls, those who are born on this earth to be reunited with one another. After watching you ladies interact, I believe it was meant for you to have." She placed the crystal in Alex's hand and smiled, "You have a lot to learn about each other, but the path the two of you have chosen to walk is definitely going to be a fulfilling one."

Unsure of quite how to react, the dark-haired woman figured the best thing to do was to simply say thank you, and so she did. She walked over to where Samantha was watching the prisms as they continued to filter through the room at various angles. "Ready to eat?"

"You didn't really ask that question, did you? I've been ready for hours." She looked at the bags in Alex's arms. "Did we really purchase all that?"

"Sure did."

"How many stores did you say you were going to take me to?" Her green eyes twinkled as she looked up at her lover.

"As many as you want to experience." Alex answered, smiling down at the love of her life. "We've just begun."

"I think I want to spend the rest of the time sight seeing. Janet was telling me about some of the places around here; I didn't realize there was so much to see here. "

"Oh, I have sightseeing planned Samantha, you can be sure of that." Tender blue eyes looked down on her lover as she opened the door for Samantha to get into the Jeep. Placing the packages in the back seat, she climbed into the front next to the blonde.

"So, what do you feel like eating?"

"Anything that doesn't eat me first." Samantha smiled over at her mate.

"I could swear we finished doing that just a bit ago." Alex laughed, her vivid blue eyes sparkling.

"You know what I meant!" Samantha gave the brunette a pat on the leg.

"There's a large difference between what you said, my love, and what you may have actually meant."

"Alex . . . "

"Okay, what kind of food would you like?"

"I don't care. You know which restaurants are good around here, you choose."

"How about Italian? We haven't had that for a couple days?" Alex raised both eyebrows and smiled at her lover. Samantha was well aware that the brunette could eat Italian food every day of the week.

The tall woman continued, "I know this nice little restaurant not far from here, and we don't have to dress up. It has the best grilled Portobello mushroom appetizer."

"Stop, Alex! You're torturing me; let's just go. My mouth is watering just thinking about it. Italian sound marvelous."

Minutes later they pulled into the driveway of small chateau-looking restaurant. A friendly hostess greeted them at the door and seated them, per Alex's request at a small corner table. Samantha noticed the homey décor; it was as if they were dining at an old friend's home and the smell of Italian cooking permeated the air. Soft music echoed throughout the establishment via speakers on the wall and the soothing tones of Jerry Vale came ringing through the room in the language of his ancestors.

"I love Italian music, don't you Alex?"

"Yeah," the dark-haired beauty answered shrugging her shoulders, "but I prefer the food."

"Me, too." Samantha agreed. "So, do we start with that mushroom thingy you told me about?"

"Sounds like a winner to me." Alex motioned the waiter over and ordered a bottle of Sangiovese, the grilled Portobello drizzled with an herb-infused olive oil, and some deep fried Bufala Mozzarella with a spicy tomato sauce. When the waiter left, she smiled at her companion. "That ought to keep us busy until the entrees arrive. Are you super hungry or do you want to share?"

"Are the portions large?"

"Oh, yes and we have the two appetizers to deal with. When we order the dinner a salad comes with it and then there are the bread sticks."

"In that case, sharing sounds like it will do. What's good?"

"Everything is good, but let me tell you a few of the favorites." She looked down at the menu for a few seconds. "Looks like they've added a few things since I've been here last. I used to get the risotto with the assorted seafood, Shiitake mushrooms, leeks and tomato sauce, but it looks like they've added red pepper raviolis with smoked Mozzarella primavera, that sounds really good."

"Go for it, sounds good to me, too." Samantha gave Alex the go ahead.



When the waiter returned with the wine, he poured a small amount for Alex to taste and then proceeded to fill both glasses. About the same time the appetizer arrived.

"Damn, Alex these portions are meal-size." The small blonde acknowledged after the server left.

"I told you that you would not go away hungry." She lifted her glass in a short toast to an uneventful remainder of the trip. "I promise to keep my temper in line and make the rest of our stay fun." Her blue eyes sparkled in the dim candle light that surrounded the table and Samantha found herself warming before the wine even had a chance to work its magic.

Dinner was delicious as Alex promised it would be, and between the two of them, they managed to finish everything they ordered, including the wine. Samantha was a little concerned about Alex driving but the tall brunette assured her lover that she was quite capable and Samantha had no intentions of arguing with her. The trip back to the resort was a short one and Alex suggested a walk before they returned to the suite.

"I think I need a long walk," Samantha admitted. "After all that heavy food and wine, I must admit I feel both bloated and a little lightheaded."

"I know how to assure that the end of an evening will go my way," Alex teased as she put her arm around her lover's shoulders. "Give you a gourmet meal, and you can deny me nothing." She smiled down at Samantha as they continued walking toward the falls.

"That may be one way, but really all you have to do is look at me with those baby blues of yours, Alex Dorian, and anything you want, that is within my granting, is yours in a heartbeat. But, I think you already know that." With her arm around the taller woman, she squeezed slightly to bring home the remark.

"Well, if we are going to start a mutual admiration society, the same goes for you and those sparkling emeralds you call eyes, Ms. Samantha Renee Riley."

"Hey, I didn't go using your middle name!" Sam objected.

"Oh," Alex gave Samantha a woeful look. "But your middle name is sooo cute," she teased as they continued walking toward the cascading water.

The night air managed to cool the earth slightly, but the winds were still blowing warm. The mist from the water tickled faces, as Alex led Samantha over toward the horse stables.

The closer they got the more the odor of the freshly baled hay became evident. "Gary told me Tillie was still here," the brunette stated almost to herself. "She's a beautiful Palomino, Samantha." The taller woman explained as she opened the stable door and switched on the lights.

"Gary has a full-time groomer on the premises now," she informed Sam. "He used to only have a couple horses, but when more and more patients began using the riding as part of their therapy

treatment, he decided to increase the number. He told me today that they now have six horses that can be rented out to the clients."

The sounds of hooves moving and horses snorting lined the way as the two walked toward the last stall at the end of the stable. Standing regally with her head out of the stall was a beautiful blonde horse with gorgeous brown eyes.

"Samantha, I would like to introduce you to Tillie. Tillie, this is Samantha; she is an extraordinary person. What is that you say?" The brunette put her head closer to the horse's as the animal whinnied and shook her head. "You remember me, dontcha girl?" Velvet blue eyes then smiled in the direction of Samantha as she motioned the smaller woman closer.

"Alex, I'm not that good with horses."

"Don't worry, Tillie isn't just any old horse. She's special, you'll see." She grabbed her lover's hand and placed it on top of the horse's head. "Just pet her like you would a dog, that's right. See she likes you; I knew she would."

"I've never been around horses much, Alex, but she is beautiful."

"If we don't get a chance to ride while we're here this time, Samantha, we'll definitely make the time on our next visit," the dark-haired woman promised. She walked over to a hanging bag and took a few of pieces of sugar out, then turned to face Samantha. "Here, hold your hand flat like this," she demonstrated.

When Samantha's palm mimicked her own, she put the sugar in the middle of the smaller woman's hand. Then placing her own hand under the smaller one she moved Sam's arm toward the horse until the sweet treats were within gobbling distance. "Just keep your hand flat, Samantha," Alex warned.

With one arm wrapped around the small waist and the other arm outstretched under Sam's, Alex could feel her lover's trepidation at approaching the large animal. But, when Tillie began gently nibbling at the sugar in Samantha's hand, Alex could feel the muscles in the blonde's body relax and knew even before she glanced around, that the smile, which always warmed her heart was beaming on the small woman's face.

"See, she likes you." Alex prodded.

"She likes the sugar," Samantha giggled. "No," she corrected, "I think she may like me a little."

"Animals know when people have kind hearts, Samantha, and yours is one of the kindest hearts I've ever met." She turned the blonde around and placed a strong hand under the perfectly formed chin of her mate, tilting Samantha's face to meet her own. As she gently kissed the soft eager lips she sighed. "I love you, you know?"

"Hmmm," was the only reply she received.

"You've heard about a 'roll in the hay'?"

"Of course, why?"

"Ever had one?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Are you game?"

"Right here?"

"No, the stall across from Tillie is empty and there seems to be a pile of fresh hay in the far corner." The look on Alex's face was priceless as she grabbed Samantha's hand and led her across to the empty stall, flipping off the light switch at the end of the stable. "Be a good lookout for us, Tillie," she told the horse as she glanced back and then opened the half-door in front of her. "You make lots of noise if someone comes in."

"Alex do you think someone will come in?"

"No, I was only kidding. It's the middle of the week and most everyone is in bed by this time or at least getting ready to go to bed." Kicking some of the hay around she made sure there was a soft pile for them to recline on then she looked around and found a folded blanket draped over the stall wall. "Here we can use this." Placing it on top of the mound of hay she sat down and pulled Sam down with her. "This should make it a little more comfortable."

"Alex are you sure you want to . . ."

The question was stifled by lips that refused to hear objections. Alex lost no time in unbuttoning the blouse that kept her from experiencing the feel of Samantha's skin and then just as quickly, adept fingers undid Samantha's bra. While keeping her eyes peeled on the vision before her she pulled her own shirt over her head and took off her sports bra. One swift movement and the lover's went from a sitting to a reclining position. Alex leaned over and slowly lowered herself down until her nipples were barely touching those of her mate. Her tongue protruded ever so slightly as she descended to the already partially parted awaiting lips.

"What if someone . . ."

"They won't . . . stop worrying . . . just relax."

Alex swayed back and forth, her nipples teasing those underneath them, causing both sets to stand erect. Then she lifted herself to position one firm breast directly above her lover's mouth. A small tongue darted out to play with the mound that stayed just out of reach.

"Alex you're teasing." Samantha whined.

"You want this?" Alex cocked an eyebrow and smiled as she moved her breast closer to the full lips, brushing the smaller woman's cheek and then pulling up higher again. Samantha went to grab at the moving flesh but her hand was caught by a much stronger one, as it took both her hands into one and held them above her head. Then Alex relaxed, making full use of her body length, allowing her breast to resume its position above the sweet eager lips of her lover's mouth. Samantha opened her lips and invited the firm, round, excited bud in, sucking on it gently then running her tongue around the outside of the puckered areola.

She continued sucking tenderly, groaning with delight and thoroughly enjoying herself and the morsel before her. In the meantime Alex ran her free hand down the length of the slender body under her. She slipped long, graceful fingers between Sam's panties and her soft skin, easily pushing the clothing down beyond her lover's knees where Samantha effortlessly lifted each leg to totally free herself of the encumbrances. Alex could feel her lover respond to her lightest touch and smiled in the anticipation of the delicious seduction to follow.

"Is it the smell of the fresh hay or the danger of discovery that turns you on my love?" Alex queried softly.

"Hmmm," Samantha responded, "perhaps a little of both, besides the fact that making love to you in a new and unusual place is a total turn-on." She wiggled her hands free from their solitary restraint, with Alex's permission, of course, and placed one on either side of the perfectly contoured face just inches from her own. Running her fingers back through the thick, dark hair she brought Alex's lips down to meet her own, teasingly sucking at the taller woman's lower lip before snaking her tongue into the sweet moistness that was Alex's mouth.

The scent of the hay mixed with perfumed Obsession was indeed an earthy pleasure that was stimulating Samantha's senses. Using her body as leverage when the taller woman was least expecting that the smaller might move, she caught the muscular form off guard and quickly switched their body positions. Now it was she who was doing the straddling of shapely hips. She unbuttoned Alex's shorts and pulled them off in one fluid motion, noticing that the raven-haired seductress had negated to wear underwear, which actually increased her desire. "Was that in anticipation of this very moment?" she asked with a grin, running her fingers through the curly dark mound she was practically sitting on.

"What?" Alex arched an innocent eyebrow.

"The lack of underwear. Were you readying for tonight's activities this afternoon."

"No! I just didn't feel like wearing them."

"Uh, huh," Samantha grinned again as she let one finger slip through the lower lips and into the moist recesses of her lover's passion."

"Honest," Alex gasped, at the unexpected entrance and stimulation.

The stalls were fairly dark, but Gary had installed small skylights to allow the access of sky during rainy days when the horses were kept inside. Tonight they acted like windows to the stars as the beams from Heaven radiated down upon the two lover's. The trickling sound of the waterfall played an enchanting rhapsody as the ballet of love continued. There was just enough moonlight shining through to capture the look of absolute adoration on Alex's face as she gazed into the emerald pools of her lover's eyes, accented by the rays of moonlight as it trickled into the stall.

"You look like one of the Goddesses you so admire, my Destiny, with your golden hair glowing in the moonlight." Alex commented, reaching up and cradling the face she cherished.

"And you are my Princess Charming," Samantha countered, "here to allow me to live happily ever after."

"But as a Goddess you wouldn't need a Princess Charming; with a wave of your hand or blink of your eye, or whatever it is you would do, you could create your own happy ending."

"That being the case, then I wouldn't want to be a Goddess." The smaller woman bent low and placed kisses on her lover's cheeks. "I would rather have my Princess than make my own happiness." Alex started to speak again, but Samantha covered the partially opened mouth with her own, squelching any attempts the dark-haired woman might have considered making at speaking.

Without the constraints of a bed and almost within the limits of the blanket the two continued exploring each other, discovering new zones of pleasure as they molded hay to form expressive wells in which to accommodate their bodies and bring to climax their appetites for each other.

Samantha kneeled on the hay as she proceeded to change the positioning of the loose straw, stuffing it under Alex's back and buttocks until, with Samantha still on her knees, Alex's womanhood was practically face level. The rays from the moon made the moist area between the dark folds glisten, and when Samantha placed her fingers on the hot liquid and swirled them around, her fingers glistened as well.

After slowly removing the now damp digits, Samantha licked them one by one, with Alex watching in anticipation of where the agonizingly erotic tongue would be going next. Of course the blonde had no intention of disappointing; she leaned forward, her eyes never leaving the indigo blue of her lover's, as she placed her mouth on a feast awaiting a solitary invitee.

The raven-haired beauty dangled a long leg over each of the smaller woman's shoulders as Samantha drew her ever closer. The blonde moaned as her tongue found its way through the soft dark curls and between the nether lips to linger for seconds at a time in one area and then another of her partner's passion. She took her time, slowly absorbing droplets of a sweet tasting aphrodisiac, before quickening her pace to whip at the now swollen bud that silently screamed for attention. By increasing her movements, she coaxed Alex to orgasm and beyond, and then placed her lover into a realm where the world disappeared, and the only beings in existence were the two of them, naked, and rolling in the hay.

And so they continued, taking turns at pleasing and being pleased. Once was definitely not enough, and the night was already transformed into morning, before the two found themselves contented.

If hay could talk, it would remember this night when it spoke of the evening the two lesbians from some place called California invaded a small stall on the outskirts of Sedona and turned the stable into a shrine of love.

Finally spent and with their scents mixed with that of the hay and the horses, the two lovers were satisfied to rest in each other's arms. Samantha looked up through the skylight into the early morning sky and spotted the constellation Pegasus. "Look," she entreated as she pointed upward. "The winged horse."

"Excuse me?" Alex's mind was not flowing in the same direction, and the blonde took her by surprise with the outburst.

"Pegasus -- look." Again she pointed. "How funny that that should be the constellation showing through the stable window. Pegasus is one of my favorite constellations of the fall sky." She stopped and thought for a second. "We should be able to see Monoceros, the unicorn in the sky chart Mom and Kelley gave me, around your birthday."

Alex simply held her tighter, shook her head and answered with a obligatory, "That's really interesting, Samantha."

"I'm going to have to get you interested in the constellations, aren't I? We have such an unobstructed view from the cliff at home. It's a sin not to star gaze."

"We'll do that between having our past life regressions, learning more about your psychic side, building the center, and your writing. Does that sound good to you?"

"Now you're teasing."

"Why yes, I guess I am." Alex smiled.

"But the stories are all so interesting. Pegasus wasn't always resigned to merely carry around Zeus' thunderbolts, you know?"

"No, I guess I didn't."

"There was a time when he went on great adventures with Bellerophon who carried the head of Medusa to fight against the Chimaera . . ."

"Whoa . . . let's have the stories a little at a time, okay?" She lifted her lover's face up to gaze into her own. "The trivia you have stored in that brain of yours, Samantha. How do you keep it all categorized?"

"It's easy because I love the stories, the characters, the romance, and the adventure." She cuddled closer feeling Alex's skin respond to her softest touch. "It gets my imagination flowing." The small blonde whispered.

"I don't believe your imagination ever stops flowing, my love, but that's one of the attributes that makes you so special to me." She kissed the golden crown that nestled at the tip of her chin. "Do you think we ought to dress and go back to the suite, or would you like to be found by the stable hand here in the buff when the sun peaks over the red rocks?"

"I think the former suggestion is best." The blonde untangled herself from the muscular form of her soulmate and sat up. "You felt marvelous tonight, Alex."

"As did you, Samantha." Alex joined her in sitting and drew her close. "You know, sometimes my mind wanders back to our first meeting, Samantha. And the more I think about the circumstances surrounding it, the more I agree with you and Mom about souls finding their way back to connect with a lost part of them that has been there since the dawn of time."

"Does that mean we'll be getting the past life reading sooner?"

Alex smiled broadly, "When the time is right, okay?"

"Yeah, I can be patient. I keep learning more about us as we are now; getting to know us as we used to be can wait a little while, especially now that I know it's definitely in the not too distant future."

On the short walk back up to the suite Samantha asked Alex to give her regards to Janet in the morning and tell her that thanks, but she already saw the stables.

"Oh, sure," Alex replied. "And should I also tell her how you sampled the hay?"

"I think not unless you want to incriminate yourself as well, Ms. Smartbutt." Samantha grinned at the thought of anyone knowing the way they spent the last couple hours, but even the thought of the encounter warmed her all over. It obviously warmed her cheeks as well.

"I might be Ms Smartbutt, but you'd definitely be Ms. I've Got a Secret cheeks if anyone were to take a look at you."

"What?"

"Samantha if you get that red just thinking about what just transpired, what would you look like if someone were to start talking about it."

They were still laughing when Alex opened the door to their suite. Samantha walked over to the glass enclosure to view the waterfall from a distance while Alex made her way to the kitchen to get them something to drink. A few minutes later she handed Samantha a tall glass of orange juice.

"This might help you from feeling dehydrated in the morning after all that wine we put away tonight."

"It certainly was good, though. I wish we had left a little food on our plates to bring home; I sure could use an early morning snack about this time."

"Why does that not surprise me?" Alex chuckled softly.

"Seriously, though, we should probably get to bed; you have a busy day planned. I, on the other hand, am a lady of leisure. I can . . . "

"What makes you think I'm going to allow you to sleep while I'm up working my butt off?" The eyebrow arched and the smile was ever so slightly wicked.

"First off, I don't think you Ever work your butt off," the blonde smiled, patting the firm buttocks of the woman standing beside her. "Secondly, you have a heart of gold and wouldn't think of making me get up merely because you have to." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Alex's cheek.

"I'm glad you have such faith in my being a nice person, Samantha. Speaking of sleep, I don't need a lot, but I should get some, especially if you're going to put me through calisthenics again tomorrow night like you did tonight."

"I put you through . . . whose idea was it to test the hay?"

"Oh, alright, big baby, I guess we were both a little to blame with how the evening turned out. I for one would not have changed a minute of it."

"Me either," the small blonde confessed.

Opting to wait until the sun came up to shower, the two deposited their clothes on the nearest chair and crawled into the soft bed, relishing the fact that there was no straw sticking out from between the covers. A once in a lifetime experience, maybe, but neither of them wanted to make a habit of rolling in the hay.

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Cursing the realization that her inner clock worked no matter where she was, Alex wiped the sleep from her eyes as she carefully deposited Samantha onto her side and slipped quietly out of bed. She would be on guard this morning just in case the imp she loved decided to surprise her again in the shower, but she had a sneaky suspicion that the blonde would remain sleeping this a.m.

After grabbing a nightshirt and covering her nakedness, Alex entered the living room and stole a glance in the direction of the courtyard. The sun was on the rise and she knew there was some extra time for a little exercise. After beginning to brew a pot of tea, she stepped onto the terrace



and greeting the sun as she did so many times, before she limbered up with one of her regular TaiChi routines.

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Gary was up exceedingly early, having experienced an exhausting night of almost no sleep at all. He hated confrontations like the one that took place the yesterday and the upset threw his system into an unaccustomed state of tension. Rising before dawn, he decided to take a ride on Tillie. She was his favorite, probably because it was Alex who picked her out of a group of young foals years ago. The beautiful brunette seemed to have a way of knowing an outstanding bargain when she saw one. No matter what she attempted, it always seemed to turn to gold, except in the romance department. The woman had a dark past in that respect. Gary was hoping that she would be able to rectify her actions with her newest lover, as he felt the cute blonde was a good influence on the usually all too somber executive.

Upon returning from his ride, he noticed that some of the treats were missing from Tillie's sugar bag and he was also aware of the disarray of the stall opposite the palomino's. *If my guess is correct, Alex, in her own unique way, more than made up with Samantha for the embarrassment of the afternoon disruption.* He smiled inwardly as, in his heart of hearts, he still wished that fate would have given him a chance to make a play for the tall woman's affections.

Having handed Tillie off to the stable boy, also an earlier riser, Gary walked back toward the residential building via the courtyard. Glancing up in the area of Alex and Samantha's suite, he spotted the tall graceful creature whose only claim to his affections would be those of friendship. So as not to be spotted, he ducked quickly behind a tree where he could see yet be unseen and watched as Alex continued her graceful maneuvers of the ancient discipline. He silently thanked her for coming into his life, if only from a distance and mentally told Samantha that she was a very lucky young woman.

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She always felt refreshed and balanced after completing a session of TaiChi and this morning was no exception. Feeling centered and calm she practically floated into the kitchen to pour a cup of tea. For years the sound of silence served as a refuge for her but now when there was no laughter or chatter from the small blonde sleeping soundly in the next room, the silence sometimes became unbearable. She wondered how she made it this far without Samantha by her side, but she knew without a doubt that being without her was an existence she never again wanted to endure.

An uneventful shower and dressing found Samantha still soundly sleeping and just before leaving, Alex bent over and gently kissed her beauty on the forehead. "Sleep well, I'll see you at lunch," she whispered.

"Hmmm, Alex, you smell so good." Small arms unexpectedly reached up and pulled the taller woman down on top of her. "Do you really have to go work?"

"Samantha I think you already know the answer to that." Alex pushed up on her elbows and stared into half open sea-green eyes still unable to focus. "Go back to sleep, I'll meet you down in the dining room at 1:00 like we planned. No sense in the two of us having to be up and about already."

"See," Samantha grinned sheepishly. "I told you that you would let me sleep."

"And you were absolutely right. If I'm gracious enough to let you sleep, why don't you just go ahead back and do so. "

"I will just as soon as you, leave. I just wanted to say good morning before you took off into the big bad world of executives without me."

Now it was Alex's turn to laugh. Even when she was only half-awake the imp underneath her possessed the uncanny ability to turn on the sunshine in her heart. "I love you forever, my Destiny." Alex leaned down and placed a tender kiss on her lover's lips.

"I love you back, Princess Charming, now have a good morning."

"Will do, sweetheart, see you in a bit."

With that the taller woman hopped off the bed and strolled out the door with a huge smile on her face. *Now that's the way someone is supposed to be sent off to work!* Knowing she would only be gone a few hours was the only thing that kept her feet moving in a direction that was opposite to the beauty hopefully once again sleeping on the bed.

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One thing Samantha never had a problem with was falling back to sleep after being awakened, especially if the hour was early or the night before was late. Today was beginning to add a new note to that ancient tune. The blonde was finding that the emptiness of the bed when Alex left was no longer conducive to sleeping. She grabbed Alex's pillow and snuggled tight, wrapping her body around it as if it were the personification of her lover, but closing her eyes only started her mind generating thoughts of the night before. Tossing and turning did no good, nor did putting her head under the covers to keep out the rays of the morning sun. Sunlight never stopped her from sleeping before; she couldn't imagine that it was the problem now.

"Well, shit!" She cursed at the pillow and the sun and the bed. "I am beginning to get more like her," she acknowledged to the air. "Or maybe I just don't want to be in bed without her," she mumbled as she pushed the covers aside and got out of bed.

Even Sam admitted that the morning was beautiful. The sun was filtering softly through the glass panes and there was still a residue of morning mist surrounding the waterfall and causing even more rainbow prisms than usual. This was truly a land of enchantment. She continued on into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of tea. Taking it out onto the terrace, she sat and contemplated what she was going to do with the entire morning now that she had one to fill.

By the time she was ready for her second cup of tea the bard in her decided that now was as good a time as any to begin writing. For years the thought of writing a novel swam around in the recesses of her mind. She had written poetry, short stories, and even a few newspaper columns, both in college and for a small town newspaper. Now she was being afforded the opportunity to make her dream come true and if she didn't take the time that was being offered then she would have no one but herself to blame if the damn thing never got started.

Always before she determined that it would be kind of an autobiographical story. Now that seemed childish. *Before you can write a book, Samantha, you need to pick a topic. Okay, thinking of the topic will be the topic of discussion while showering, okay? Okay.*

That settled she poured her second cup of tea and headed toward the shower.

As unmemorable as a solitary shower can be, she did come up with a theme for her soon to be book. Again the autobiography came into play, but she would change and embellish a little instead of making it like a real autobiography. She decided to write a lesbian love story. She was sure it was still a fairly open market, and it was something she could draw on her experiences for. Okay . . . her experiences . . . and the experiences of others more knowledgeable . . . like Alex and Mom and Kelley and all the other lesbians she'd met so far. Yes, it was definitely decided - a romance novel for lesbians. *Oh, that means you'll have to write the love scenes! I know. I can do that. Are you sure? You've never done that before.* Shaking her head and arguing with herself she still kept coming up with the same idea. *Lesbians need good love stories. I know, but do You have to be the one to write them. If not me who? And, if now here When?*

Having pretty much taken care of all her own reasons for not writing a lesbian love novel, she talked herself into thinking that it was exactly the kind of book she should write. After all, her ideas were fresh on the subject, her being a newcomer to the realm. All that worried her was the fact that Mom-Aurora would have to read the book before asking her publisher to take a look at it. *Damn Samantha, love story, sex scenes, your mother-in-law, are you sure? Yes, this genre has barely been touched. Yes, I've made up my mind. I'll just run it by Alex a little later today and see what she thinks of the idea.*

Now she was absolutely sure of what she was going to write about. She finished getting dressed, picked up the laptop and headed for the porch to sit and write the great American . . . no, scratch that . . . to write the best damn lesbian romance to date. After all she had Alex for a teacher, you couldn't get any better than that!

Samantha sat on the porch so long that her butt actually started to get numb from sitting in one position, so she got up, toasted a bagel, and poured another cup of tea. Sitting back down, her fingers kept busy as she started on her outline. Of course, the story would begin with the first time she spotted Alex sitting on the lonely stretch of beach a solitary figure who looked like she had just lost her best friend. She hoped Alex wouldn't mind being one of the main characters in a book. But, it would be a work of fiction. No one would ever know if the people she was writing about were real or not. *Give me a break, Samantha! Do you think you're that good a bard that you could actually hide your real identities in the story line? I don't know; now you're confusing me. I hate when you do that. Well, someone has to look on both sides of the dilemma, don't they?*

While she continued to debate with herself, time slipped away and before she knew it the sky was beginning to cloud over and thunder echoed from the tips of the high red rocks. Glancing down at her watch she noted the time to be about 12:30. *Pretty punctual this Sedona Rain.*

Quickly she closed up the laptop and stepped back into the living room area. She watched as, once again, nature staged a little play for anyone who cared to watch. Within minutes the sun receded behind a huge dark cloud and Zeus continued to play in the sky with his lightening bolts. Her luncheon appointment was not until 1:00; she wanted to sit and watch the storm before starting downstairs, and hoped that it would be a short one like yesterday's was.

Nature did not disappoint and the rain came down in a torrent but only for a very short period of time. It was just enough to cool the warm wind that had been blowing and to bring with it the fresh scent of flowers from a meadow somewhere off in the distance.

The poet in Samantha found the midday storm enchanting and refreshing. She quickly reopened the computer and sat it down on the kitchen table. The words came swift and true, from her heart out onto the keyboard, which, in turn, placed them onto the mechanical page before her. Sedona was definitely the place she needed to be to get her Muse's attention and her artistic juices flowing again. Sedona, with its serenity, red rocks, and ancient stories, was a wonderland for the imagination. It was a marvelous little town with its links to the past and its heart in the present, while it graciously extended tentacles of hope into the future. This was an enigmatical place, a place where she would perhaps get in touch with her mystical side, as well as her return to the written word. *Magical Sedona and its midday rain.* The poem came so quickly it almost wrote itself. It was short and concise but it said what was in her heart when she watched the storm play its brief interlude.

### ***SEDONA RAIN***

***Each day with little warning, in the middle of the heat,***

***Thunder begins sounding with an ancient Indian beat.***

***The sky gets dark and stormy as though grimacing in pain.***

***Then the Earth receives the blessing of Sedona's midday rain.***

Before turning off the computer, she saved the poem on the same disk she was saving her outline on, took it out and placed it on the table. She was ready to go down and have lunch with Alex and was pleased with herself that the morning passed so quickly. She was sure Alex would be proud of the fact that she actually settled on a theme for her novel and was ready to start putting the words down on paper.

Something made her think about the items they had purchased the day before, and she started to look around for the bags before remembering that they had left them in the Jeep. Not being able to find the keys to the vehicle, she figured Alex must have taken them with her. *I guess the new toys were the farthest things from my mind last night. I'll have to get the keys from Alex after*

*lunch, so I can play with the ocarina a little while Alex is working this afternoon.* Eager now to get down to the dining room, she left the suite and headed to the elevator.

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The morning flew by as the two of friends settled all the minute details of grips, holds, colors, ropes, and various accessories for the wall. Absolutely everything Gary needed to set up the new equipment was now ordered and promised delivery by drop shipment on Friday. He was one happy camper as they walked over to the residential building to meet and have lunch with Samantha.

"You know Alex, I think we put in a full day's work in these past few hours. I can't think of anything left to discuss or rehash before the equipment arrives on Friday."

"I was hoping you'd say that," the tall exec answered as they walked through the double doors leading into the dining area. "Most of the building expansion is opening up of rooms on the inside with very little structural work on the outside. If you put those contractors of yours on some heavy-duty overtime, you should be able to assemble the wall Friday afternoon or at the latest Saturday. I'm sure there are still people who like overtime aren't there?" She grinned over at her friend.

"Most definitely, Alex. Most definitely." He assured her.

"That being the case, I'll be able to give it a once over before Samantha and I leave on Sunday."

"Does that mean I won't be seeing much of the two of you between now and then?" Gary looked over at the friend he so seldom got to visit with, a quiet look of desperation on his usually joyful face.

"Oh, I imagine we can manage to spend a little social time together." She gave him a buddy punch on the arm before sitting down at a table close to the glass windows. "I thought I'd take Samantha shopping again this afternoon and maybe up to Bell or Cathedral Rock. You could meet us for dinner if you'd like. I've promised her sunset at the airport."

"Isn't that a little too romantic for a third party to be tagging along?"

"Tell you what, why don't you ask Janet if she'd like to come along, also and we'll make it a sunset party."

Unable to resist an invitation to spend an evening with one of his favorite people he jumped at the chance. "Great, I'll talk to her right after lunch. Now what time was that?" He chuckled.

"Yeah - sunset - just keeping watching the sky." She shook her head and laughed. "You want to call in the reservation, or should I?"

"I'll be here at the center with easy phone access. I don't think they're open right now, so I'll make the reservation. In my name," he added knowing that the business exec was used to having confirmations in her own.

"Well, that means you get to pick up the tab instead of Have It All," she countered.

"Hmmm, maybe I should let Marge pay for some of this little vacation of yours. On second thought, it will be made in the name of Alexis Dorian."

"I thought as much," she declared as she glanced up and saw Samantha coming toward them. Her face lit up and Gary didn't need to turn around to know that sunshine just entered the room for the tall dark-haired beauty.

"So . . ." Alex stood up to switch seats and give Samantha the one next to the window. "How was your short morning - tell me it was boring and lonely." She smiled, giving Sam a peck on the cheek.

"Actually . . . Hi Gary . . ." Samantha acknowledged the man now sitting next to Alex.

"Hi back at ya." He responded with a short sentence knowing she interrupted her train of thought to recognize his presence.

"As I was saying, actually it was not all that short."

"No?" The arched eyebrow rose and sapphires twinkled in the direction of the small blonde.

"No. I got up just after you left. I puttzed around for a bit and showered, but then I started seriously thinking about my writing. I think I've come up with a theme for my novel."

"Really? You got up early?"

"Yes, I am capable you know?" The small blonde gave Alex a lover's pat on the arm.

"Should I ask about your topic or wait and be surprised?" Alex played along knowing Samantha was enjoying the attention, but also knowing that the blonde would not be able to keep the contents of her new project a secret.

"Oh . . ." Now she was becoming a little shy about the subject and began to blush a little.  
"Maybe this isn't a good time to talk about it."

"Why? Is it something embarrassing or personal?"

Now she really wasn't sure if she wanted to breach the subject with Gary sitting right there in the middle of them, but she'd gone this far and wasn't going to back down.

"As a matter of fact," she started a little louder than she anticipated, "I thought I'd write a lesbian love novel." There she said it.

Having just filled her mouth with tea, Alex practically spit it out all over the table when Samantha blurted out the idea for her story. "Samantha . . ." *How in heavens name do I say this gracefully, and in front of company.* "Do you really think that should be the theme of your very first attempt at writing?"

"Well, it's not like I haven't ever written before." Irish eyes were getting a little sharp around the edges.

"I know, Hon," Alex tried to smooth over the statement, realizing she should have waited to discuss the question of the subject matter until they were alone. "I mean, it's just that it's so . . . personal."

Gary was sitting in between the two and feeling more and more like perhaps he should get up and leave. They weren't arguing, but the scene was becoming quite emotional. He thought again and laughed inside, it wasn't everyday one got to see the cool, calm, and collected Alexis Dorian become your average emotional female. He figured he would simply sit back, drink his tea and watch the play of emotions run the gambit across the face of the two beauties at the table with him.

"You told me to pick something I knew about and you know that the first rule in being a bard is that you write what you know."

"I understand that, sweetheart, but . . ."

"Okay . . . okay . . . I get the picture. You don't think I can write a convincing love novel because you're the only woman I've ever been to bed with . . . oh, shit!" Now her face really did start blushing as she looked at Gary and then around the room. Her voice exceeded the volume of mere table conversation, and she suddenly realized that their table was now the focus of attention in the small dining area. Blonde locks were all that showed behind the menu as she quickly hid her face and whispered. "Alex I think maybe we should talk more about this upstairs in the room, huh?"

"I agree Samantha." Alex put a calming hand on her lover's arm. "It's okay, half of Gary's employees are Gay or lesbian and the type of clientele he attracts are very open to all lifestyles."

"Did I make a fool of myself?"

"No, of course you didn't. Did she Gary?" Concerned blue eyes searched her friend's face for collaboration in the fabrication.

"Come on Samantha, think of it as a testing ground; look how much attention you received with just the mention of the book." He did his best to make light of the situation and quickly turned the topic to food. "Hey, we have a killer special - soy burger topped with Swiss cheese, grilled

mushrooms, onions, and secret sauce." When no response was registered from either of the women, he continued, "French fries and white chocolate crepe suzettes flambé for dessert."

Samantha couldn't help but laugh when he added the totally concocted dessert to the lunch special. "I guess you better order me the special then, Gary and put in a request for two of the desserts." She peaked over her menu to see that most of the customers were going about with their own lunch, oblivious to what was now transpiring at the window table.

The subject was dropped and both Sam and Alex ordered the soy burgers with all the trimmings. Unfortunately Gary lied about the crepes but he did manage to promise that if the airport restaurant carried the dessert they would definitely be ordered with this evening's meal.

Samantha was thrilled to hear that Alex didn't have to go back to work.

"I thought we might make the rounds of the vortices since we have most of the afternoon left." Alex told her lover.

"And the midday rain has already come and gone." Samantha added.

"Have you become the local weather person?" Alex smiled over at Sam.

"No smart butt, I just thought I would comment on it since we shouldn't have to worry about getting rained out."

It was a little after 2:00 when the ladies parted ways with their friend, reminding him to ask Janet to join them and to call for reservations. They didn't need anything from the room so decided to go directly to the car.

"Do you know we forgot to bring in the bags from the crystal store?" Samantha reminded Alex.

"I guess there were more important things on my mind last night." She looked slyly over at her mate. "We'll remember to bring them in tonight, okay?"

"Sure. So, where to first?"

"I think the best place to start would be Bell Rock and then we can work our way back toward town and the airport. Sound okay to you?"

"You're the expert, Alex. I'm just along for the ride." The blonde leaned over and hugged her lover. She had been without the woman's gentle touch all morning and simply longed to be close.

They drove down Highway 179 until they were just north of the Village of Oak Creek. Alex didn't need to point out the tourist attraction of the Chapel of the Holy Cross; Samantha spotted it and made her pull over to take a closer look.



"Some woman in the 1950s had it built as a monument to her parents. It used to be open every day; I don't know if it still is. Pretty, huh?"

"Oh, Alex, it's beautiful!"

They continued southward a few more miles until Alex pulled over to the left and into the parking area of Bell Rock Vortex. "First the vortex, then some shopping and then the next vortex." She informed Samantha as she began getting out of the Jeep.

"Great." Samantha replied as she, too, got out of the vehicle. "Wow! This is huge!"

"Bell Rock is nothing compared to Cathedral, but it does have an abundance of energy. It's hard not to feel the power flowing from this site." Remembering the necklace she purchased for Samantha the evening before, Alex opened the back door and reached into one of the bags.

"Here Samantha, let me put this on your neck." She motioned for the smaller woman to come closer.

"When did you buy that?"

"At the shop last night, I found it while you were over looking at Mom's collection." The brunette smiled as she held the necklace up for the recipient to examine before putting it around Samantha's neck.

"Oh Alex, it's beautiful." Small hands came up to place a palm under the crystal. "That's Amazonite on top there, isn't it?"

"Very observant. The red stone is garnet for the heart and the Amazonite is for the throat, the crystal, of course, covers all the chakras, so you should be well protected." Alex proceeded to put the necklace around Samantha's neck.

"Thank you Alex." Samantha reached up and oblivious to anyone who might have been watching planted an appreciative kiss on her lover's lips.

"Hey, you'd better be careful. I have a lot planned for the rest of the afternoon. You do want to get to the other vortices sometime today, don't you?"

"I'll behave. It's just that this is so pretty, and it's practical, too." The blonde was very excited and receiving the unexpected present only revved up her adrenaline.

"We've pretty much missed the tourists so it's quiet. This is a nice time of the year to come here for the first time." Alex looked around and saw that they were practically alone on the large expanse of red rock. "Find yourself a spot where you feel really serene and just sit there for a little bit. I think you'll find, if you are alone, you'll get more of an attunement to the rock."

"Now who's the one getting mystical. Are you feeling okay, Alex?" A small hand reached up to test the warmth of the taller woman's cheek, only to be caught midway and put up to full lips, the recipient of a quick kiss.

"I'll be right over there on that ledge, if you want me." Alex turned and left Samantha standing and feeling very small, and dwarfed by the huge fixture of rock in front of her.

Sam noticed a small Juniper tree growing alone out on one of the ledges and it drew her attention. She climbed up a couple ledges before reaching the tree and could feel her energy intensify the further up she climbed. Glad for the necklace Alex had just given her, she sat down next to the tree, looking out over the scenery that surrounded the area. *This is absolutely beautiful; words don't do this place justice. What kind of a bard am I, if I can't even seem to put into words the splendor of this area?*

At first Samantha thought it was just her imagination, but as she sat there on the warm stone, she could actually feel the beginning of external energy beginning to course through her body. *Relax and let go, Samantha, relax and let go.* She sat in a yoga position, her eyes closed and oblivious to anything else around her. Soon she found her entire body rocking back and forth in a slow steady rhythm. Letting herself be taken by the energy she sat totally enjoying the warmth of the sun on her face and the addition of an energy source from the solid piece of earth she was sitting on.

It seemed like an eternity later when she heard the soft contralto voice of her lover as she closed the gap between them. "Samantha . . . are you sleeping Samantha?"

"No, but I couldn't tell you for the life of me where I was." The small blonde took the outstretched hand and got to her feet. "I had the weirdest feeling Alex."

"Like you were rocking?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

"This vortex is an extremely strong source for the kundalini energy coursing up from the earth. I'm glad you got to experience it." The brunette smiled as she squeezed her soulmate's hand. "Ready for a short shopping trip?"

"Sure," she replied, as Alex knew she would. "I wish we thought about bringing drinking water with us."

"No problem, we'll pick up a couple bottles when we get to the Village. Come on, we have a lot to see before sunset."

Continuing south on Highway 179 for a short distance Alex pulled the Jeep into an area that looked like a small Spanish Village. "This place is called Tlaquepaque Village and it's been here for over 20 years. The name means 'the best of everything.'"

"But it looks like it's been here forever, Alex."

"That's the beauty of this place. It was built around the landscape, leaving all the large vegetation where it stood. I guess that's why all the artisans and craftspeople flock here and the environmentalists lend their support by frequenting it. Besides that, there's always something new and different in the stores, so you never seem to visit the same Village twice." She put her arm around Samantha as they walked from the parking area. As soon as they stepped off the blacktop and onto the uneven pavement of the village, a feeling of history surrounded the two women and they could have sworn they just stepped from the present into the past.

"This place is lovely Alex, thanks for the side trip." Samantha looked around in awe as they passed a masonry chapel decorated with small stained glass windows. "Look at that."

"Yes, it's like a little bit of old Mexico right here in Sedona." Alex commented.

They walked along through the tiny Village, admiring the creativity of the local artists and craftspeople, with projects ranging from rugs, candles, and jewelry to food and drink. The community was complete; it even contained a smattering of indigenous crafts from the residents of some of the surrounding Indian tribes.

Samantha was the first to spot a chocolate shop, and the two gave into the temptation to sample some of the sweets.

"You sure you want to stop in here? You don't want to ruin your dinner." Alex mumbled in the voice of reason.

"As if!" Samantha replied as they stepped through the threshold and inhaled the intoxicating odor of freshly poured fudge.

Leaning over close to Alex, Samantha whispered, "Do you think they give samples?"

"Sure, just ask them."

After tasting a few flavors, it was Alex's turn to lean and whisper. "Don't you think, maybe we should buy something?"

"Oh, yeah . . . that might be a good idea . . . they've been so nice about letting me try the different flavors. Which one do you like the best?"

"I liked the mint and the pumpkin, which ones do you like?"

"The peanut butter and vanilla."

"Okay then." Alex told the clerk she could stop feeding the child standing next to her and she motioned at Samantha who gave her a playful push. She proceeded to order one half pound of

each of the four flavors they liked the best, and after paying for the sweets, gently led the blonde away from the counter.

Samantha was amazed at all the different pottery shops, until Alex informed her that no Mexican Village would be complete without at least one pottery shop. They agreed that they didn't need to spend precious time in the bookstore today and quickly looked at a few jewelry stands before winding back to the entrance and getting back into the car.

The next stop was Cathedral Rock Vortex. Because they didn't have enough time to take the hike up to Cathedral Rock from Verde Valley School Road, Alex continued around to Oak Creek and then turned right on Chavez Ranch Road, following the road to Crescent Moon Park. After paying the entrance fee they entered the park and drove as close as they could to the creek, which runs along the site. From the time they started passing in front of, and then traveling behind the awesome structure, Samantha could not take her eyes off the spectacle before her.

"By the Gods, Alex. Look at that! It really does look like a cathedral or a castle."

When they were in front of the rocks Alex pointed out the two spires standing regally between the larger two structures. As they exited the car, the spires were no longer viewable, but the site was still breathtaking.

"The closer we can get to the creek here Samantha the stronger the energy. What you felt at Bell Rock was a masculine energy, strong and strengthening. The energy here is feminine so it is more nurturing and calming. We'll end up at Airport Vortex tonight, which is also masculine and then probably tomorrow travel over to Boynton Canyon which has energy of both yin and yang." She took Samantha's hand and together they walked toward the creek.

"The energy gets stronger the closer you get to the water."

"I think I can feel it," Samantha admitted. "It's a meditative mood."

"Yes, that's what I feel, too," Alex agreed.

Finding a narrowed area of the creek, Alex picked Samantha up and carried her over as she was the only one with legs long enough to stretch across the small expanse of water without getting her feet wet. On the other side she deposited Sam back down on dry, solid ground.

"We have a small amount of time if you want to walk up the trail a bit, Samantha. I don't think the sun will be going down for a couple more hours. I figure if we leave here by seven there should be no problem with seeing the sunset at the airport."

"I'd like to walk a little; it's so peaceful here."

"That's why Sedona is such a popular area. People come here when their lives are literally falling to pieces and quite a few of them get an introspective look into themselves and leave happier and

more content." Placing her arm around her lover's shoulders she drew her close as they slowly walked the well-worn path.

"I thought tomorrow we could take in some of the local color so to speak. We aren't far from Montezuma's Castle and the Tuzigoot National Monument."

"I'm glad you can pronounce those names - you must have had a lot of practice with that last one." Samantha smiled up into eyes that beamed love down in her direction.

"Your innocence is radiant, do you know that Samantha?"

"Innocence?"

"The way you look at things - when I'm with you I get to experience the joy of seeing all this over again for first time. I love showing you around places that have become like old comfortable shoes to me; it gives me a new perspective."

"Glad to be of service." The petite woman leaned closer and rested her head on her lover's body as they walked together for a while in silence.

As the shadows began to lengthen, Alex finally suggested that they start back toward the car. "We don't want to miss your sunset, my Destiny; you'd never forgive me for that." Alex gently kissed the flaxen head as they turned and started to walk away from the gigantic rocks.

"I don't know about never," Samantha giggled. "Never is a very long time."

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It was close to 7:30 by the time they pulled into the restaurant parking lot at the airport. "I think we may have to order our dinner first and watch the sunset as we finish with dessert." Alex informed Samantha. "It doesn't look like the sun is going to be setting until close to 8:30 tonight. We'll have to make them keep the restaurant open just to accommodate your whim, my Destiny."

"You're kidding, right Alex?"

"No, no - not kidding. They usually close at 8:30, but that only means no one can get in after that. Once you're already seated, they are more or less at your mercy." She smiled over at her lover who wasn't sure whether to laugh or get upset. "It's okay Samantha. Gary and the owners are good friends. Besides I'm kidding about the mercy part, they serve until 8:30 and it's only just 7:30 now."

With the smile returning to the Samantha's face, they entered the building and traveled up to the terrace. Searching the room as they got off the elevator, Alex spotted Gary and Janet already seated at a window table. Alex could tell that the spectacular view was received well by Samantha as the blonde caught her arm and whispered to herself, "By the Gods." Alex smiled and patted her hand as she led her to the table.

The dinner was superb and the company was enjoyable. Samantha got to know Janet and Gary both a little better and heard some 'war stories' that Alex would probably have rather she hadn't, but the evening was enlightening and pleasant.

Although the restaurant didn't serve crepe suzettes they did have Samantha's favorite desert, Tiramisu, and as Alex promised, the entire invoice was picked up by Have It All as a business expense.

As Alex predicted, the awaited event of the evening did not begin until close to 8:30. When old Sol did finally begin making a descent, Samantha fawned over the different variety of colors and the way the light hit the crevices of the large red rocks that partially surrounded the airport. The vibrancy of the display was fabulous and the wait was well worth the show. The little group found out soon enough that there was no hurry for them to leave. The owners came over while everyone was eating dessert, to chat for a bit with old friends and be introduced to a new one. A bottle of their best champagne was used as a welcoming gift to toast the newcomer.

By 10:30 the wine was gone, the dinner fairly digested and even the dessert was no longer weighing heavy on anyone's stomach. They bid goodbye to the owners, and then Gary and Janet played follow the leader with them back to the resort.

On the way home, Alex asked if Samantha wanted to take a swim before they retired and received a definite yes.

"I think that would be a marvelous way to end this perfect day. I sat at the edge with my feet in the other day; it felt great. It's heated isn't it?"

"Sure is," Alex told her. "Usually it's a bit cooler here this time of the year." This time she didn't leave the bags in the back seat, she grabbed them and up to the suite they went to change.

Even the night air still contained a bit of the desert and a warm breeze blew as the lovers amused themselves with what turned out to be a midnight swim. With the stars twinkling overhead and the rays of moonlight streaming down, the pool was aglow with sparkling white pinpricks. The lights inside and surrounding the pool area automatically turned off at the stroke of midnight, but the celestial orb and accompanying multitude of stars made certain that the lovers received a majestic environment to complement their early morning swim.

Samantha loved to watch her dark hero, her muscles flexing in the cosmic glow, droplets of liquid shimmering from her well-defined biceps, as she swam beside her in the warm water.

"Well, you can rack this up to another beautiful day, my love," Samantha announced as she swam sidestroke beside Alex. "For a quiet little town, Sedona has a lot to offer."

"It's quite a find, I must admit. I'm extremely glad Gary decided to settle here with the Center. Gives us a place to vacation." She turned her head and smiled, as she looked at her angel, whose face was haloed by the soft white light of the Lunar Goddess. "You look beautiful in the moonlight, Samantha."

"You're just saying that," the blonde blushed as she splashed water gently at the dark vision before her.

"No, seriously," Alex swam closer and stood. Samantha was in water up to her neck, but the taller woman placed two strong arms around the slim waist in front of her and gently lifted the blonde up to face level. "Why in the name of the Goddess would I say something like that if it weren't true?"

"Because you love me, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder." The Irish imp retorted.

"That being the case then I should elaborate on the statement and say you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen being kissed by the soft light of the Goddess of the Moon."

As Samantha wrapped her arms securely around the taller woman's neck the lover's embrace became a kiss of fire.

"Promise me we'll never lose this magic, Alex." Samantha pleaded.

"I promise, my Destiny, 'til the end of time the magic will stay." Again she kissed the soft lips that parted slightly at contact, allowing the dark-haired beauty's tongue full entrance to the sweet cave within. "You done swimming?"

"Yeah, we're getting a bit conspicuous, huh?"

"Could be. That and the fact that if we don't stop now we will definitely be 'X-rated' and I think Gary would object to that." She smiled and cocked her head for Samantha to follow her to the shallow end of the pool where they left their towels.

Back up in the suite Alex asked if Sam wanted to take a quick shower with her to get the chlorine out of their hair and off their bodies.

Sam was exhausted from walking around all afternoon but agreed that it would probably be a good idea. "I don't know why, but whenever I get out into the open air for any length of time, it really tires me out."

"It's probably because you aren't used to outdoor physical activity, your most favorite spot is at your computer or in front of the television watching a movie." Alex teased as she turned on the water and stepped into the stall.

"Okay . . . no need in being mean." Samantha whined stepping in after her.

"I'm not, sweetheart, just honest. Sometimes you're like a little mole with your love of small, dark spaces."

Now Samantha burst out laughing, "My but there is a double entendre mixed up in that little sentence," she giggled.

"You know what I meant!"

"Yeah, but what you said, Alex, ooooh . . . two different things."

Unable to keep the grin from forming on her face, the tall beauty conceded to her 'slip of the tongue,' after which Samantha agreed that she was an inside person but that she had started doing a lot more outdoor activities since moving to Laguna.

"Whenever I'm near water I go out more often," the blonde stated. "I love the emotional attachment to a large body of flowing liquid, it's tranquil and makes me introspective. I did bike and swim some before I met you." Samantha insisted, in her own defense.

She coaxed Alex to turn around so she could wash her back. "But, I have become a lot more physical since we've been together. I now know a little Tae Kwon Doe and can even climb a wall.

"My aren't you the versatile athlete." Alex teased. "Are you waterlogged yet?"

"I think I am as a matter of fact," she put her hands palm up toward her lover's face. "Just look at this . . . I'm pruning!"

Alex grabbed the naked woman and wrapped her in a towel, patting her dry and then removing the soft cloth. "There. All clean and dry and smelling sweet."

Hand in hand they walked into the bedroom. "Want me to go get one of the candles we bought yesterday?"

"That would be nice, and one of the incense sticks, too?"

"Sure why not." The tall woman strolled into the living area and rummaged around in the bags until she found a candle and incense that complimented each other.

Back in the bedroom she stuck the incense into the candle so the ashes wouldn't fall onto the floor and lit the two objects.

Samantha was already in bed but quickly changed positions when Alex climbed in beside her, laying her still damp head on the taller woman's chest.

"Hey, that's chilly," Alex jumped slightly when Sam's cool hair touched her skin.

"Want me to move?"

"No, it's okay now." She hugged the other half of her soul close and kissed the moist blonde hair. "I'm glad you're having a good time, Samantha. I think you're going to enjoy tomorrow even more. The Indian ruins in the area give off an almost magical feeling when you're standing in the middle of them, wondering how they felt as they lived off the land, were at one with nature, and



only killed out of necessity. You know, it would make sense having to kill a buffalo, or any other animal for that matter, if you did it because it was the only protein your environment supplied. And, when the Indians did make a killing, they used every part of the beast. It clothed their bodies and filled their stomachs; it put a roof over their heads and supplied them with new tools. I think the most important part, though, was that they thanked the animal for its sacrifice. I feel they were genuinely sincere and believed that the animal willingly gave up its life so that they could survive. They were not selfish and wasteful like we are today."

She stopped talking, as she felt that Samantha's breathing had taken on a constant rhythmic quality. After listening for a few seconds, the dark-haired beauty smiled, realizing that her love had quickly fallen asleep during the middle of her philosophical discussion. It had been a long day for the two of them and tomorrow would be just as full.

Again she kissed the crown of Samantha's head as she whispered her goodnight to the already sleeping woman. "I love you, Samantha. Sleep well my sweet."

"Love you, too." Sam mumbled, snuggling closer.

"See you in my dreams, my Destiny."

As she closed her eyes to join Samantha, the raven-haired beauty smiled when she received an unexpected whispered response from the sleeper in her arms. "Hmm, hurry Alex . . . I'm waiting."

Continued in Part 10.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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### ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The

names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## **Part 10**

### **Chapter 10 (Thursday morning)**

The early morning rays of sun coaxed sapphire eyes into opening shortly before the blonde in her arms stirred. Alex lay feeling Samantha's body rise and fall, ever so slightly with the slow, constant tempo of sleep. The dream the raven-haired beauty was focusing on, as she stared intently into the whiteness of the ceiling willing the visuals to reappear, was the same dream she always had when visiting Sedona. She knew in her heart it was time to stop denying that life existed for her before the here and now . . . before her life as she now knew it. The addition of her soulmate to this most recent adventure only increased her inner knowledge that reincarnation was not an imaginative creation cast into the world by mystics and dreamers. She was beginning to look forward to the regression promised by her moms, especially now when the dream was becoming more vivid than ever before. Last night she actually managed to see her face and she was remembering more of the dream upon awakening than she did in the past. She still felt funny about expressing her dream to anyone and kept it locked away in the deep recesses of her psyche.

Samantha stirred and she kissed the sleeping woman tenderly. "Good morning, Sleeping Beauty; do you want to have an early breakfast?"

"Uh, huh." The answer was whispered and the body did not move until a few seconds later.

As she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, Samantha told Alex that she was remembering having a really unusual dream. She thought the two of them were in it, but they didn't look as they do now. "Funny thing, Alex . . . I think you were a man!" She giggled and the taller woman tickled her to increase the laughter and encourage Samantha to wake up.

"Stop . . . you're . . . Alex." The blonde squirmed around in the bed trying to get out from under the larger woman's strong grasp but to no avail.

When Alex finally did stop tickling, she was lying on top of the petite frame, face to face with the other half of her soul. It was more than just a desire to think that this gift from the Goddess was anything but her soulmate; the desire was quickly becoming a truth that could no longer be denied.

She leaned down the rest of the way and planted a morning kiss on first the lids of both sparkling eyes, the tip of the pert nose, and one peck on each cheek before softly placing her lips on those of her beloved.

"Hmmm, you taste good . . . But, I was trying to tell you . . ."

"That I was a man." Alex finished the sentence for her.

"It was only a dream Alex."

"You dream of men, Samantha?"

"Not just any man." The smile faded and a serious expression crossed the fair face. "If you would rather I kept my dreams to myself . . ."

"Are you capable of that?" Alex smiled, wanting the morning to go smoothly. "Keeping it to yourself?"

"Alex . . ."

"I'm kidding with you Samantha. Of course I want to hear all about your dream, but do you want to lay here and discuss dreams or get dressed and go eat breakfast?" The brunette had reacted curtly to Samantha's mention of her dream, and she was sorry about that, but her reaction hinged on the reality of her own dream, which she was still unwilling to discuss. Her heart skipped a beat when Samantha mentioned that in her dream Alex was a man. She was a man in her dream, also. Not only was she a man, she was an Indian.

"Dreams later, I'm famished! Must have been that early morning swim." Samantha gave her lover a coy morning smile.

"At least we showered before sleeping so that little chore is out of the way. It seems to be one that takes more time than I ever remember it taking before." Alex had her lover smiling again and that was just the way she wanted this day to start out.

"We'll be doing a lot of walking today, so be sure you wear comfortable clothes and shoes. Lots of uneven ground around these parts, especially up at Tuzigoot and in Boynton Canyon."

"I'm excited about seeing the ancient ruins . . ." The sincerity in Samantha's voice was unmistakable.

"Yeah, well you could've fooled me," Alex turned and gave the blonde a crooked grin.

"Huh?" Samantha looked honestly puzzled at the statement.

"Last night . . . eh . . . early this morning, when we got into bed, I tried to give you a nice little philosophical explanation about how I felt about the Indians and you, my darling, fell quickly to sleep."

"Oh, Alex. I'm sorry, I . . . "

"It's okay, I was tired too. My guess would be not quite as tired as you were, though. Anyhow, I'll just have to bore you later today."

"Alex you don't bore me . . . "

"Samantha - I'm kidding."

"I thought maybe you were but I wasn't sure."

"No you didn't; you thought you hurt my feelings and I was upset - I don't get upset over little things like that," the brunette replied smiling broadly in the direction of the almost clothed beauty.

"It's just that you're so good at that 'poker face', it makes it difficult to tell when you are fooling around."

"That's part of the fun of kidding with you. You can never tell when I am. Come on - finish getting dressed. I'm going to make a quick call to the office and see how everything is going in our absence." She walked out of the bedroom and into the living room. It looked like they were going to be blessed with another beautiful day. *Thanks to the Goddess for the weather and to Gary for inviting us. I think we are going to have a perfect day for sightseeing.*

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It seemed that the one breakfast food Samantha never tired of eating was pancakes and today was no exception. Both of the women ordered a full breakfast and then a stack of pancakes to split between them. Fully sated, they were more than ready to start on the daytime adventure Alex planned. On the way out of Sedona they stopped and purchased a couple insulated water bottles to carry around on their necks. Alex remembered to bring the digital camcorder this time so they could have some printed memories of the trip.

Finally settling into the Jeep, Alex turned to Samantha to fill her in on the first order of business. "I thought we'd go ahead and start with Montezuma's Castle; it's a little over a half hour from here. That way you won't get tired of riding before we even get started."

"I won't get tired of the drive, Alex. The scenery's too beautiful to become boring and . . . " she reached over and patted her lover's knee. ". . . I've got the best company in the world."

"I'm glad you think so." The brunette smiled over at Sam. "I've been to most of these places quite a few times so I can tell you about them before we get there if you want. It might help pass the time."

"Sounds great, guide . . . inform away."

"Okay, let me see . . . I guess the best place to start would be with the Indians who occupied this region and who were responsible for the ancient dwelling we're going to see. It's funny I've always been drawn to these ruins and today I'm really excited about taking you there to see them."

"I know," Sam interjected. "This area feels almost like coming home, doesn't it? I've never been here before and yet I feel like I have. I guess that's what they refer to as Déjà vu."

"Yeah . . ." Alex glanced over at Sam and then continued with her explanation. "Where was I . . . the name of the Indians who lived here was the Sinagua Indians. These Indians came a long time before the Aztecs were known to be in the area, but when people first encountered Montezuma's Castle they mistakenly assumed it was built by the Aztecs."

"So, do you remember anything about these Singawa . . ."

"Sinagua Indians. Yes, I have always been interested in the ruins and the tribe. They are a very ancient tribe; history has them dating back to around 1070 AD, and their territory stretched from this area all the way to Phoenix. They were basically corn farmers, hunters, and gatherers. From the looks of the ruins they were cliff dwellers and they practiced water conservation, even then. Guess we could start taking some lessons from the ancients, huh?"

Keeping pace with the gorgeous landscapes that lined the highways since their arrival in the Sedona area, the scenery on the way to the site was spectacular. Within a short period of time, Alex was pulling into the park. The monumental structures found Samantha awe struck.

"Want to see if they are giving the tours today?" Alex asked after they paid the entrance fee and parked the Jeep.

"Sure."

They were in luck as the next scheduled tour was to begin in 10 minutes. While waiting, they picked up a few of the pamphlets used for the self-guided tours.

The guide walked them along the paved trail below the National Monument. She began by explaining that it was not a castle and that it had been abandoned close to a century before Montezuma was ever born. The structure was falsely named but still the name stuck.

She also expounded on the Sinagua Indians, telling the small group that the prehistoric people got their name from the Spanish words "sin", which means without and "agua", which means water.

"Guess that's why they practiced water conservation," Alex leaned over and whispered into Sam's ear.

Samantha smiled, shook her head and gave her lover a playful pat on the arm before turning back to listen to the ranger.

According to the guide, the Sinagua were one of the most ancient of tribes and historians, even today, argue over the exact years of their existence. Some believe the tribes origin started around 1000 AD, while others have said they existed as early as 500 AD. Some people believe there are no actual records of their existence until after the eruption of the volcano near today's city of Flagstaff. It was that catastrophic event that was said to have forced them to begin assimilating elements from other cultures and strengthening their own in the process. Around 1300 AD, due to their migratory patterns, the Sinagua, as a separate tribe seemed to disappear. It was felt that they probably joined with other, stronger Indian nations around that period of time.

The attendant continued by telling the tourists that the limestone ruins were considered to be some of the best-preserved cliff ruins in the United States. The main structure reminded Samantha of a high rise apartment from hundreds of years ago. They could see that the structure was about five stories high and were informed that there were about 20 different rooms inside.

Below the 'castle' were more ruins of dwellings that consisted of close to 45 rooms. The bottom area was not as protected from the overhang of the cliff, and consequently, it was deteriorating more quickly than the cliff dwelling was.

When they were finished with the tour and taking pictures, Alex gave Samantha the choice of going on to Jerome or stopping at Montezuma's Well, located a short ten minute drive away. The choice was easy and they were on their way to another of Arizona's intrinsic areas of beauty.

Within minutes after arriving at the Well, Alex knew the choice to stop here, before going to Jerome had been a good one. The tranquility of the area was mesmerizing.

"Oh Alex this is so peaceful," Samantha exclaimed as they walked down the path leading to the limestone sink.

"And to think this was caused by the collapse of a huge underground cavern."

"Do you think there are many of those still around this area?"

"Caverns?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know Samantha. I suppose there could be; the area is riddled with rock formations. Who's to say that there aren't more caves and caverns around, also." She put her arm around her lover's shoulder as they walked toward the water.

Samantha stopped to read the sign as they entered the closest area to the reservoir. "Look at this . . . over one and a half million gallons of water a day flow through here. That's a lot of water!"

"Yes, but read what it says about the flora and fauna."

Looking back down at the sign, the blonde finished reading about the underground springs and the plant and animal life that was found in the waters here and in no other waters on the face of the earth.

"This is really a special place, isn't it Alex?"

"Yes and for once, people done something right by trying to keep it as one of our National treasures."

They stood looking out over the clear, still water, listening to the birds in the trees above them, and enjoying the soft breeze that was playing through their hair.

"I couldn't have picked a more beautiful time of the year if I tried," Alex commented. With her arm still around the smaller woman's shoulders, she leaned down and laid a soft kiss on the crown of Samantha's head. "I'm so blessed to be able to finally share this with you, Samantha."

The blonde looked up into sparkling blue eyes, made even brighter by the early afternoon sun. "I love you Alex. I'm glad we're able to share this, also."

She put her arm around Alex's waist and stared across the water and into the ancient Indian dwellings. "If you look really close up into those compartments, you can almost imagine how the Indians lived so many years ago. They experienced a charmed life if you stop and think about it."

Alex gave her a puzzled look.

"I know." Samantha reacted to the question in her lover's eyes. "Day-to-day living was a lot more difficult. That's what you're thinking isn't it? But, you also need to take into account the fact that they didn't have to worry about the rent, the mortgage, or credit cards. The land supplied them with everything they needed to survive. Sure they worked at the farming, the gathering, or the hunting. But it was all here for them."

"You are such a romantic, Samantha. Only you would look at this grouping of stone homes and see the simplicity as a gift. And you wonder why I love you?" Alex gave her a quick squeeze.

"Where did you say we were going next?" Samantha asked.

"Jerome. It's a small copper mining community about five minutes away from Tuzigoot, but it's about 45 minutes from here. You ready?"

"Anytime you are."

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Jerome was a nice little sidebar. As they pulled into the once thriving mining town, Samantha noticed that the storefronts were very decorative and that a lot of the merchandise was displayed outside the stores.

"It's mostly another one of those little artist towns now," Alex informed her as they parked on one of the narrow side streets. "I figured we could have a nice lunch before heading over to Tuzigoot."

"That sounds like an excellent idea; it looks like they have quite a few places to chose from. Have you eaten at any of them."

"No. The last time I was here it was late on a Sunday and most of the town was closed up tight. One of the things that I did remember was the fact that some of the buildings seemed to be sliding down the cliff and that others of the older buildings looked about ready to fall down. But, looking around it seems as though they are still hanging in there and still looking like they are about to collapse." She laughed, pointing Samantha in the direction of a building that had definitely seen better days.

"I feel like we've stepped back 100 years, Alex. The streets are narrow, and the buildings all look like turn of the century architecture. So this was a mining town?"

"Yes, and from the history of the town, it was quite bawdy. Gambling, drinking, prostitution, you name it, Jerome offered it. If I remember correctly, the mines contained copper, gold, and silver and made a few people very wealthy."

"Gold miners . . . you have to give those people credit. That must have been a horrible to way to live." Samantha did not catch the pensive look on her lover's face when they talked about the mining of gold ore. "I don't know why, but I have a soft spot in my heart for people who put their all into trying to better themselves like that."

"You don't think they were just too lazy to get a real job?"

"Lazy? How could you say that Alex? Can you imagine the hardships they suffered out in the elements day after day? Just think about it - all that suffering and some of them never realized their dream."

"But what of the ones that did, Samantha. How do you feel about them?" The question was softly asked and Alex waited patiently for the answer.

"I feel if they didn't hurt anyone on the way up and continued to be decent people, then they deserved the fruits of their labors, so to speak. If I were out in all kinds of miserable weather, battling the elements, as well as other people, who were trying to accomplish the same goal as me, and I, by the grace of the Gods hit a mother lode . . . well . . . I would certainly feel that I



deserved it, especially after all that was given up along the way." She looked up into Alex's baby blues and smiled. "You know, The Unsinkable Molly Brown is one of my favorite movies."

"You are such a pushover." Alex pulled her close and kissed her on the cheek. "That's one of the reasons I love you so much."

"One of the reasons you will not like me is because I get very grouchy when I am hungry."

"Are you trying to tell me it's time to eat?"

"Most definitely," the small blonde answered, pointing in the direction of the nearest restaurant.

They ate a leisurely lunch in one of the small restaurants, the walls of which were covered with pictures of Jerome as it looked in the late 1800s. In actuality the town didn't appear much different today, but the women were assured that most of the buildings were refurbished making them definitely more habitable.

The waitress possessed a plethora of knowledge concerning the little community and even took a break pulling up a chair and sitting as she told the young women some of the history of the small mining town.

She began by telling them that back as early as the 15th century, when the Sinagua, Hohokams, Anasazi, and Apache Indians still thrived in the area, the Spaniards made their presence known. The Indians of the region had been gracious enough to share with the newcomers and showed them their copper mines, but the Spaniards did not see any of the gold they so desperately desired. What they didn't know was that whereas most mining towns laid claim to only one ore that brought them fame, Jerome was blessed with copper, zinc, lead, silver, and gold. Unfortunately for the Spaniards, in their disappointment they looked no further and moved on leaving the gold to remain in the mines. It wasn't until the late 1800s, practically 300 years later that the potential for gold mining was realized. One of the richest mines in the area produced in excess of \$1 billion dollars in the rich ores flowing from the land and the city of Jerome resided just northeast of that mine.

She spoke of the melting pot the small mining town became and the changes it underwent as it housed both the exceedingly rich and their counterparts, the exceedingly poor. She left the women to mull over their history lesson, while she went to get their food.

Upon returning with the meals, she assured them that although the town didn't look much different today than it did all those many long years ago, looks could be deceiving, and that all the buildings were quite functionally sound and refurbished.

When they were just about finished with their meal, Alex glanced down at her watch.

"Samantha, Tuzigoot is only about five minutes away and I'd like to be there around three if you're about ready to go?"

"Hey, anytime you are, but you know we really don't have to rush if you want to look around the town more." Her green eyes sparkled in the sunshine that was cascading in through the open-shuttered window.

"Well, it's going to take us a while to look around the ruins and I wanted to get to Boynton Canyon before the sun set today. We have the camping trip planned for tomorrow and Saturday, and we'll be leaving on Sunday so that doesn't leave us much time."

Finishing off the last of her tea, Samantha smiled over at her lover. "Well, then shall we go visit an Indian ruin?"

Alex paid the tab and within five minutes after getting back into the Jeep, the women found themselves standing in front of a sign designated Tuzigoot National Monument. Unlike Montezuma's Castle that was built into a cliff side, these ruins were constructed on a hilltop near the Verde River.

"By the Gods, Alex, this gives me chills just standing here," Samantha whispered as her small hand interlocked with that of her lover. "I feel as though I've just come back to somewhere I've been before . . . only now it's all changed."

Alex looked down in awe at the response Samantha was having to the ruins of what seemed to have been a large village. Chills ran up and down her spine as she remembered her first reaction to the prehistoric structure. Slipping her hand from Samantha's she put an arm around the smaller woman's shoulders. Bending down she murmured into the blonde's ear. "I had the exact same reaction on my initial visit here."

Emerald eyes gazed up into pools of crystal blue. "You did?"

"Yes." Alex acknowledged. "It was almost like coming home."

The two lovers stood quietly for a few minutes looking out across the expanse of rock croppings and what was left of a two-to-three story ancient apartment complex that contained somewhere in the vicinity of 110 rooms. When they finally did begin to walk among the ruins, they did so hand-in-hand, never losing touch with one another as they walked through in an almost ritualistic haze. Few words were spoken, until they stopped just inside the doorway of one of the partially intact rooms. Alex entered first and extended her free hand to assist Samantha in walking over the debris that littered the ancient portal. As long slender fingers touched those of the smaller woman, there was a surge of electricity that passed through the lovers and with mouths agape they stared, into each other's eyes. Looking into the emerald mirrors of Samantha's soul, Alex, for a split second caught the glimpse of another green-eyed beauty with hair the color of spun gold and skin the color of a newborn fawn. She gasped at the vision in her mind's eye that disappeared as quickly as it came.

"Alex did you feel that?"

"Yes, Samantha, I did." It was all the tall woman could do to keep her knees from buckling under her.

"It felt like the room was welcoming us home." She looked down at her arms and then held them out for Alex to see. "Goosebumps. Look, I'm covered with goosebumps."

Alex lifted her own arm to reveal the same reaction of her skin to the mystifying experience. There was an eerie stillness in the small room, as the two women stood, staring at each other. When the silence was broken they both began speak at once.

"Seems as though I . . ." Alex's voice cracked with emotion.

"Wow." Samantha exclaimed, as she put her arm around Alex's waist. "Do you think we lived here before? That we were Sinagua Indians?"

"I am beginning to seriously lean in that direction. Reincarnation might just be the viable explanation to our reaction to this area. Kind of weird, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Samantha looked up into a face displaying almost as much confusion as her own. "You know, Alex, it's one thing to espouse the idea of reincarnation and a totally different experience to actually come upon a place where you feel you are actually reliving an episode from a past life." Sam shivered and Alex held her close, surrounding her in the warmth of two strong arms.

They continued to explore the ruins before entering the Visitor Center where many of the artifacts dug up in the surrounding area were housed. After spending some time studying the stone axes, pottery, primitive tools and jewelry, they decided it was time to move on if they wanted to have enough time to visit the Canyon on their way back to the resort. Travel back to Sedona would take nearly an hour, but there would still be a few hours of sunlight to allow them to experience one of the most popular of the vortex sites.

The trip back toward Sedona was introspective as each of the women focused on the energy and emotions that were summoned forth in the ruins of Tuzigoot. Each of them reviewed the memory-like feelings that, had they compared with each other, they may have found were very similar in nature. When they did speak they mostly mulled over all the information received about the surrounding area from the tour guides and the waitress in Jerome, avoiding the more personal aspects. Each was slightly afraid to voice her mind, thinking that perhaps her imagination was simply running overtime in the visited antiquities. Samantha was sure Alex would tease her about her imagination getting the best of her and call her a hopeless romantic and dreamer. Alex, on the other hand, was battling with denial of what she saw and felt in the primitive structures that were so steeped in history.

The day would have been full, even without the visit to Boynton Canyon, but Alex wanted Samantha to experience this totally balanced vortex which encompassed both the yin and the yang energies. She turned onto Dry Creek Road and drove toward the parking lot adjacent to the walking trail.

After getting out of the car Alex informed Samantha that the trail they wanted was near the 30-foot knoll she was pointing to.

"It seems as though the energy is strongest around that small hill." Alex informed her lover.

"Even the trees can't seem to decide which way to bend here, Alex. Look how twisted these Junipers are."

"They do look a bit distracted, don't they?" She placed her hand in the smaller woman's and led her up and around the tree-lined mound. "It's not difficult, but it's quite a hike up to the Indian ruins, are you up to it after all we've already done today?"

"Sure, might as well exhaust myself . . . I know I'll sleep good tonight." The petite blonde looked up into eyes that caught the rays of the late afternoon sun and sparkled as though they were sapphires with miniscule diamonds etched into them. She smiled and squeezed the strong hand of her mate as they continued on.

Pointing with her free hand, Alex brought Samantha's attention to the resort laid out below them. "The name of the establishment is Enchantment Resort. From the surroundings you can see how the name is appropriate. We're going to veer away from here a little way up that path."

At first the trail was easy and extremely well worn, but once they veered to the right it became less so. Within the span of approximately a quarter mile they approached two caves housing Indian ruins. The practice on the climbing wall came in handy as the two inched toward the shelter but the exertion was well worth the reward when they got to the top and entered the grotto.

"These are only a few of the ruins in this canyon, Samantha. This entire area is covered with old dwellings. The Sinagua built the homes to take advantage of the most available light so most of them are built facing where the sun can reach them the easiest." Alex picked the ideal season to visit Sedona or rather Samantha picked the ideal time of the year to be born. The area was void of any other hikers and there was an eerie silence surrounding the canyon as they walked among the homes of the ancient Indians.

Not satisfied with looking down on ground level the two women decided they would rock climb to the upper ruins. The trail was diminished by this time and they were pretty much on their own as they picked an area and began to climb. When they reached the ledge that had been visible from below, the vista was breathtaking.

"Come on, I've never gone any higher than here, but I've been told that the views keep getting better and better. There is a pool hidden amongst the boulders back beyond this shelf, or so I've been told." Grabbing Samantha's hand the dark-haired beauty led the way toward the back of the ledge and past a grove of prickly pear cactus. When she came upon the pool, she stopped and waited for Samantha to stand beside her. The trail had been rough and narrow, and they were unable to travel side-by-side.

"Oh, Alex." Samantha exclaimed as she looked over the clear, unruffled water of the secret pool. "It's like a magical hideaway."

"It's magical because you are standing here with me," Alex commented.

Samantha stood on a small flat rock, which allowed her the height to look directly into eyes that were a perfect match for the late afternoon sky. "I love you more than you'll ever know," she professed as she threw her arms around Alex's neck and hugged her tightly before giving the raven-haired beauty a passionate kiss.

Moments passed and neither one of the women wanted to break the embrace and shatter the atmosphere. Finally Alex pulled away. "There are supposed to be some fascinating ruins up past that hole in the rock wall." She pointed slightly above them. "I'm told they are beyond this rock ledge over here to the right.

"I'm directly behind you Alex. Go ahead and lead the way."

The rock ledge narrowed and then they were facing a sheer cliff side with no where to go but up. "Do you feel like you have enough rock wall climbing lessons to tackle this, Samantha?"

"It's now or never, my love. Time I put some of that practicing into real life."

Very carefully, slowly, and in single file, they kept climbing higher, up a large tree stump and holding onto small ledges as they proceeded approximately 20 feet to the top of yet another ledge. Pulling themselves up and into standing positions, they beheld a view that was usually only seen by airplane pilots, adventurous hikers such as themselves, and angels. With hearts pounding from the climb and the thin atmosphere, the two women looked out over the expanse of trees and red rock onto a wonderland of the imagination. There was not a telephone or electricity pole in sight, or any other significant trace of a civilization that was only a heartbeat away. They stood in silence, taking in the spectacular vista of the canyon in all its radiant splendor.

"I feel so close to . . ."

"Heaven." Alex finished the sentence for her. "This makes me wish I could set up house and live here forever." She pulled Samantha closer as they stood almost as one figure, high on a ledge overlooking the canyon, small creatures dwarfed by the enormity and awed by the majesty of the tall trees and the red rock.

When they finally turned around toward the cliff they came face-to-face with the mouth of the upper ruins.

"You know I didn't think about it before, but we don't even have a phone with us. We've brought no equipment, no food, and we're almost out of water. If something were to happen . . ."

"Nothing's going to happen, Alex. We've been very careful getting up this high and we'll be careful getting down. Now is not the time to start worrying about what we didn't bring."

"You're right. Let's go explore this archaic home."

As they were turning to walk toward the threshold of the dwelling, a clap of thunder came from out of no where and the sky opened up drenching them before they could take cover.

"Where did that come from?" Alex asked as she turned back around, looked up and over the outcropping that protected the ancient home from just such a downpour.

"I don't know. I guess we were looking in the wrong direction," Samantha giggled. "At least it won't last long, or the storms never seem to. But the scheduling is a little off. They usually occur close to noon."

They stood, wrapped around each other, watching as the droplets continued to fall giving the landscape an entirely different appearance. Shimmers of mist arose, as the cool liquid hit the hot vegetation and rocks. The sky did not darken, and the sunlight played with the water as it tripped over the red rock and dripped off the trees. True to Samantha's words the rain did not last but maybe five minutes and as quickly as it came, it disappeared, leaving in its wake the rush of a clean crisp breeze as it swept through the canyon.

Once again they turned toward the entrance to the dwelling, and as Alex reached out a hand to her partner, the sense of electricity, unlike any she had ever experienced before today, made an encore performance. Trying to recapture the image that darted before her eyes earlier, she held out her other hand to complete the circuit and looked into Samantha's pools of emerald green. When their eyes met, the shadows in the cave seemed to disappear leaving them standing in a sunlit room free of the debris that now surrounded them. Alex stared into the same beautiful eyes that she always did when looking at her Destiny, but the face before her was not Samantha's.

This stranger, staring back at Alex, had darker hair and her skin was a light brownish/red color. Except for the eyes, the features were definitely those of a stranger, but the feeling of attachment was strong. As soon as she loosened her hold on the small blonde's hands the image disappeared and the room returned to its semi-shadowed state.

"Alex." Samantha whispered. "I think I'm dreaming with my eyes wide open. I just imagined a vision of a gorgeous Indian brave, with hair as black as coal and beautiful bronze skin. But, Alex . . . his eyes . . . they were identical to yours! Is that crazy or what?"

"Did you say 'he', Samantha?"

The brunette sat down on the nearest large rock and looked up into the face of confusion.

"What's the matter Alex? You look like you've seen a ghost. Are you feeling okay?" She knelt down beside the seated woman and started to take her hands.

"No."

"Alex?"

"Every time I touch you in one of these ruins I get a glimpse of a person who has the essence of you but the looks of a stranger. The only recognizable feature is the eyes and they are unmistakably yours. I thought I was having some sort of hallucination, but now it seems that you have been having one of your own."

"That woman at the crystal shop said I possessed psychic abilities, maybe you do too, or maybe the two of us together . . . "

"Samantha that sounds crazy; you know that don't you?"

Samantha put her head into Alex's lap. "It might sound crazy, but Alex it's been happening. Stranger things have happened. Maybe we lived here before, you know, in another lifetime."

"I have to admit it's getting harder and harder to find fault with that reasoning. Wait until Mom hears about this; she'll eat it up." She ran her hands through the fine blonde hair at her fingertips then leaned down and gave Samantha a kiss. "All my life I've fought my mother's beliefs, trying to find a truth of my own to live by. As it's turning out hers is the truth I will probably end up living with. That regression is beginning to sound better and better to me as the days progress."

Samantha stood, a huge smile covering her face. "I am so happy to hear you say that, Alex. I'm really looking forward to the regression and now you're honestly ready to embark on it and not doing it simply because it's something I want to experience."

"But you said the Indian you saw was a male."

"We can come back as either sex you know." She smiled up at her lover.

"Yes, I know that. It's a little bit of a shock, that's all; first your dream and now this."

"You were as beautiful a man as you are a woman Alex. What I don't understand is why the blue eyes on an Indian."

"Maybe you were just seeing what was already comfortable to you, so you would know it was really me."

"Perhaps . . ." Sam paused, reliving the episode in her mind's eye. "The combination was awesome."

Alex took the blonde's face into her hands and tilted it until their eyes met. This time it was only Samantha looking back, not the beautiful Indian maiden she had glimpsed earlier.

"Samantha," the soft contralto was almost inaudible as a slight wind circled through the remains of a long ago abode. "I've been having a recurrent dream, and it's been more vivid since we've been here. In my dream I am an Indian brave. The reality of this has shaken my belief system, or rather I guess I should say has stabilized it in my Mother's corner. It's one thing to believe in reincarnation and another to actually be shown who we might have been in a former life."

"But Alex that's such a gift." Samantha continued to stare into the sapphire pools of her lover's soul, searching deeper for the understanding she knew lay just below the surface.

"Honey, I think we'd better start back down before the sun begins to set. I don't want to have to spend the evening up here, even if we once called this place home. It's a bit unsettling." Alex tried her best to put a little levity into a situation where she felt none. At this point in time she wasn't sure how she was going to handle the visions and dreams. At least she wouldn't have to go through the experience alone, and Samantha seemed to think it a great adventure. She mentally reprimanded and reminded herself that the Universe only gave what one was able to handle and that we are not given the truths until we truly want to know the answers. Perhaps it was her time and the situations were simply being put into motion to play out at her convenience.

"It might take us a little longer to get back, Samantha, but I think I saw a path leading downward once we get off this ledge. I'm afraid the rocks might be a little slippery now after the rain."

"I don't know." The blonde squatted down and picked up a handful of pebbles that had been out in the cloudburst. "These seem dry already. I think the rocks welcomed the rain and soaked it in immediately. But if you want to take the path, that's fine with me; we'll get a different view that's for sure." She stood up and brushed her hands on her shorts. "Want me to go first?"

"No, I'll go first." Alex suggested.

"Right, so you can be there at the bottom if I need to be caught." Samantha smiled at her lover, remembering the first night they met.

"I always intend to be there waiting, Samantha." Alex smiled back and began her descent.

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The suggestion to take the path, instead of climbing all the way down to where they started, did take them a little longer. But, as Samantha pointed out they were met with new and interesting sights, including getting a closer look at the mountain manzanita and a glimpse of a small pack of mule deer grazing in the shrubbery ahead of them. A short distance down the path after the first ledge, Samantha bent over and picked up a naturally shaped walking cane lying on the ground next to one of the manzanita trees.

"Am I allowed to take this with me, or would it be considered destroying the landscape?"

"Why don't you use it for hiking while we're here in Sedona and then when we're ready to leave you can decide if you want to take it or leave it here."



"Sounds like a plan. That way I have some time to talk to my conscience." Looking over at Alex she took on a serious demeanor. "You know that I will be absolutely famished by the time we get to the car?"

"There is no doubt in my mind." Alex replied.

Samantha leaned into the staff and they continued making their way toward the bottom of the path and the parking lot.

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By the time they reached the Jeep the sun was well on it's way to setting. It had been hours since they had eaten or drank anything and both of the women were parched and hungry as well as being exhausted from climbing and hiking around the ruins and the canyon. The day had been warm and the combination of sun and exertion was catching up with them. Some people only took in one or two attractions in a day; they, on the other hand, visited a castle, a well, ruins, a town, and hiked in the canyon.

Alex suggested they order a pizza, and a couple salads, and take everything back up to the rooms. She received no argument from Samantha. Twenty minutes outside of town Alex put in the call and by the time they arrived at the pizza shop, their order was ready to be picked up.

The first thing they did when they got to the rooms was change out of their clothes into nightshirts. Alex began getting the food out and drinks poured, while Samantha fooled with the channels on the television. There was a satellite connection in all the rooms, and within minutes the blonde had tuned in an old Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant movie, 'An Affair to Remember.' With the pizza sitting on the coffee table in front of them, they relaxed, watched TV and ate.

Alex never intended for them to watch the entire film, but it was obvious by the look of enchantment on Samantha's face that the television would not be getting turned off until 'The End' came on the screen. With the pizza and salads gone, Samantha cuddled over next to Alex and the tall woman put her arms around the smaller, as the blonde nestled, her back to Alex's chest.

"I just love this movie." Samantha tilted her head and looked up into her lover's eyes.

"Okay, I'm watching." Alex answered.

"Simply watching? Don't you think it's one of the most romantic movies you've ever seen?"

Alex placed a gentle kiss on the silky crown before her. "To tell you the truth, I don't think I've ever watched it all the way to the end."

"Alex! How could you not?"

"Easy . . . you pick up the clicker . . ." which she did with a grin, "and . . ." she rested her finger above the red power button, her eyebrow arching as she looked down at the disbelieving face looking back up at her during the commercial, "you push this button to turn off the . . ."

"Alex don't you DARE!" Samantha screamed.

The brunette threw up her arms in surrender. "Okay, okay . . . I was only kidding." She put the remote down on the table beside the couch and placed both arms around the woman reclining on her.

"You are going to see the end tonight." Samantha determined.

The dark-haired woman laughed quietly. "I had a funny feeling you were going to say that."

Forty-five minutes later Alex received a sharp jab in the ribs and jolted upright. "Whatcha do that for?"

"Because you're snoring, and if you don't stop, neither of us will get to hear the end of this movie!"

"All right . . . you have my attention."

"Where did you fall asleep?"

"Damn, Samantha, I don't know."

"Did you hear them make the promise on the boat?"

"The one to meet one another?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Good, now please stay awake, Alex, and watch this."

"I'm trying, Honey, but it was a long day and I did all the driving."

"It's only a little longer, Alex."

During the next commercial Alex got up, stretched her legs, and refreshed their drinks, while Samantha gabbed on about the parts of the movie she missed, due to falling asleep. About the time Sam caught her up to the where the film was now, the feature was coming back on.

The scene opened with a shot of the Empire State Building, and Alex could feel Samantha tensing up, so she gently rubbed the smaller woman's shoulders and whispered in her ear. "If this movie upsets you so, why do you continue to watch it?"

"Wait until the end; you'll understand." Samantha whispered back, not taking her eyes off the television screen.

A few minutes elapsed and Cary Grant found his way to Deborah Kerr's apartment to take her a present his aunt had left for Terry, Deborah Kerr's character. She was sitting on the couch and didn't even bother to get up to answer the door . . . it was open.

Sam started crying in the middle of a very strained conversation between the two characters and continued to sniffle as Cary Grant walked from room to room, desperately looking for something, and jabbering on like a babbling fool. When he found what he was searching for, Samantha let out a deep sob, tears falling uncontrollably down her wet face.

The scene following was, indeed, heart wrenching, but Alex could not help but smile through glistening eyes as she listened while Deborah Kerr spoke, and in unison with her, Samantha mouthed and whispered in a voice cracking with emotion, "It was nobody's fault but my own. I was looking up. It was the nearest thing to Heaven. You were there."

The blonde turned her head and looked up at Alex. "Isn't that the most beautiful proclamation of love you've ever heard?" Samantha asked, tears still streaming down her face, as she sobbed trying to catch her breath.

"You find that entertaining? Look at you? You're pitiful!" She drew the smaller woman close and wiped away the tears with her nightshirt. "What a chick flick!"

"Alex!"

"I'm only kidding, Samantha. It was a beautiful story and I'm glad you woke me up to see the end. How many times have you seen it?"

"I don't know, maybe six or eight."

"Six or eight times? All the way through?"

"Yes, I love the end!"

"You're too much . . . do you think we could go take a shower now? I feel gritty from traipsing through all those ruins today, and you certainly could use a little water on that face of yours." She grinned at Samantha as she pulled her up from the couch and headed her in the direction of the bathroom.

"I totally agree we need to get the dust off," Samantha agreed turning her head to face Alex, but continuing toward the bathroom. "But how about a Jacuzzi instead? I have a feeling we, at least I'm going to have sore muscles in the morning."

"Jacuzzi it is." Alex gave no argument. "But, if we're going to do that, how about a glass of wine?"

"You don't have to twist my arm for that." Samantha smiled as she watched Alex turn and head in the opposite direction. "I'll get the mood setters," she called after her lover.

After she sprinkled some of the scented bubbling oil into the tub and turned the water on, she strategically placed and lit a few of the candles she had purposely left in the bathroom for just such an occasion. By the time Alex came back, the atmosphere of the room was set. The vanilla wafting through the air from both the candles and the bubbles gave the room the fragrant aroma of a candy shop with the most tempting of confections resting with her eyes closed, her head against a water pillow up to her neck in bubbles.

Alex quietly placed the glasses on the edge of the tub, took off her nightshirt and barely rippled the water as she stepped into the warm liquid and over to where Samantha was sitting. For a minute she simply sat next to the rhythmically breathing blonde, staring through the soft candlelight flickering onto the features of the face she couldn't imagine not waking up to each morning. *I am so lucky you came into my life, Samantha. I know I'm not the easiest person to get along with some of the time, but with you by my side I can't go wrong. I will love you forever, my Destiny, and after what I glimpsed today, I do believe I've loved you before.*

The raven-haired beauty leaned over and gently kissed Samantha on the ear before whispering, "You smell good enough to eat."

"Hmmm . . . it's the candles." Samantha mumbled as she turned her head, without opening her eyes, to receive a kiss.

Alex covered Samantha's partially opened mouth with her own, allowing her tongue entrance to the inviting warmth beyond her lover's lips.

"No," The raven-haired beauty murmured without relinquishing her prize. "The sweetness is definitely you."

Samantha smiled and pulled away slightly. "You're prejudiced."

"You bet your sweet ass I am." Alex grinned as she pulled the smaller woman onto her lap. "Even in this candlelight I can see that you got yourself some sun today. You're not sore are you?"

"No. It's just a little pink. You, on the other hand, are bronzing up again." Samantha ran her fingers over Alex's strong shoulders and down her biceps, picking an arm out of the bubbling

water and examining the tan that her lover so easily acquired. "I wish I could tan as quickly as you do."

"I like you exactly as you are," Alex insisted, pulling her closer, their breasts touching as they floated on the water.

Samantha ran her fingers through Alex's dark tresses on either side of her head, her arms ending up around the taller woman's neck. "I never want to be without your arms around me, Alex. Does that sound ridiculous?"

"Not to my ears it doesn't," came the instant reply.

"I hope we never tired of looking at each other, touching each other, talking to each other. I know things are still really new for us, but Alex something in my heart tells me I'll never grow tired of being with you."

"Well you keep listening to that something, my Destiny, because that something is absolutely right." Strong hands gently filtered through golden locks until her hands were cradling Samantha's head. She drew the smaller woman closer and into a passionate kiss, feeling the blonde's nipples hardening despite the warmth of the tub's gently flowing waters.

Alex allowed one arm to travel down her lover's back, engulfing the firm buttocks and then changing direction to swirl gracefully around to mingle with the soft golden curls surrounding Samantha's nether lips. Even in the water she could feel the difference between the tub's liquid and the silky fluid coming from her soul mate's excitement. The sound of a soft moan and the feel of the erect nub in Samantha's depths made her smile to know the affect she had on her lover.

Ever so slowly she entered Samantha one finger at a time, slowly, methodically, increasing speed and force as Samantha's body indicated. "I love being inside you, Samantha," she whispered softly and received another moan in return as Samantha tightened her grip on the taller woman's neck.

"Gods Alex . . ." Samantha almost screamed.

Alex placed her thumb on the swollen nub so that with each rise and fall of the smaller woman's body the nub would be stroked, increasing Samantha's . . . as Alex expertly brought her to climax.

"Alex . . . "

"What my love?"

"Oh, Alex . . . ahhhhh . . ." The blonde pushed down against Alex's upwardly rising fingers as they reentered her body with ease.

"Come for me Samantha." It became a mantra that Alex whispered into her lover's ear as it passed by her lips in both the upward and downward direction.

The raven-haired beauty increased the speed and pressure of her movements. In anticipation of orgasm, Samantha's fingers dug into Alex's back, her arms squeezing their bodies together until there was not even room for water to pass between them. She held Alex in a grip while shuddering with the release of emotions that seemed to travel from her very depths throughout her entire being.

With the release of all her tensions, she crumpled in a heap, her head resting on a strong shoulder. A final shudder and squeeze before her entire body went limp on Alex.

"Think you'll sleep good tonight, my love?" Alex asked, relishing in the knowledge that Samantha was completely sated.

"No doubt about it, but do I have to get out of the tub?"

"Most definitely. You'll shrivel up and be a wrinkled mess by morning if you sleep here." She picked up the glasses on the side of the tub and handed one to Samantha.

"Oh, this will definitely put the crowning touches on making sure I sleep like a log." The blonde took the goblet and clanked it on Alex's. "Thank you for a wonderful day and a marvelous ending."

"My pleasure." Alex smiled. "Any time."

Minutes later they were snuggled comfortably in the middle of the king size bed, surrounded by the extra room they only used when making love.

"I really did have a great time today, Alex." Samantha cuddled her head into her lover's chest.

"I did too, Samantha. I've always enjoyed the ruins, but today was definitely a new experience. Maybe it's time I consciously started getting in touch with my higher self. I've fooled around with meditative manifestations occasionally but never really seriously.

"Meditative manifestations?" Samantha pushed up on one elbow, a confused look on her face.

"Didn't Mom use that term in any of her books?" Alex asked.

"Gee, I don't seem to recall it, but then there are so many new ideas she relates, it's hard to remember them all with only one reading. I was thrilled when she came out with the tapes, but now I don't seem to have the time to sit and listen."

"You don't have to sit and listen," Alex retorted. "Samantha, all you have to do is call her."

Samantha scooted around on the bed until she was sitting up, her left hand playing with the strands of hair covering Alex's forehead.

"I don't want to be bothering her with trivial stuff like that, I'm sure she has much more . . ."

"Don't be silly!" Alex interrupted. "She eats it up! You're a writer; how do you feel when someone wants to discuss your stories with you?"

"But Alex, I'm just a novice . . . Mom is . . ."

"Is a person with a very large ego, and she loves you. Questions from you would only serve to make her more impossible to live with . . ." mischief sparkled in the sapphire eyes looking up into her angel's face. "But since Kelley is the one doing the living with, what do I care." Alex reached up and pulled Samantha down on top of her. "We need to get some sleep tonight, my Destiny. I have an extremely busy next couple of days planned for us."

"I know, it's just we have so many subjects we haven't breached yet and . . ."

"And we have a lifetime to thoroughly analyze them all." With Samantha's lips so close there was no way this conversation was going to end without a kiss.

Just as their lips were about to meet, Samantha remembered something she negated to ask earlier in the day.

"Oh, Alex . . . I forgot to ask you this morning . . . how are things at home? How's Rainbow?"

"Samantha Riley, can you say, Mood Breaker?" The dark-haired beauty grinned into solemn emerald eyes and gave her sunshine a quick peck on the cheek.

"Everything is fine, Samantha. There were a few things Kim needed to discuss with me but they weren't urgent. Angel is getting along pretty good with the 'rent a therapist' but sometimes tends to overstep her boundaries and needs to be reeled back just a little. There was a hint of something else in Kim's voice, but she insisted everything was fine and for us not to worry about anything and have a nice vacation."

"Rainbow . . . Alex did you ask about Rainbow?"

"Rainbow who?"

Samantha punched her playfully in the abdomen.

"Ouch! Of course I asked about Rainbow. Kim said she's as spoiled as ever and insists on sleeping in bed with her. She thinks she's grown some since we've been gone."

"Oh, I hope not too much," Samantha whined. "Maybe she won't remember us when we get home."

"Of course she will; that's ridiculous. No one pampers that little ball of fluff like you do, Samantha." She stroked the fine golden hair and gently squeezed her lover closer.

"Okay, enough talk for tonight or I'll never get you out of bed in the morning. It's time to go to sleep Samantha."

"Good night, Alex."

"Sweet dreams, Honey."

With Samantha back in her sleeping position and safe in the recess of Alex's arm it seemed like only seconds before the small blonde was breathing the constant breath of sleep. Alex closed her eyes and replayed the highlights of the day's activities on her mind's screen. She willed herself to conjure forth the image of the fair-haired Indian maiden who carried the soul of her Destiny in her eyes and then placed the tall, dark-haired brave beside her. *So, I was an Indian warrior. That's fine with me, as long as I ended up with the most beautiful young woman in the village.* She smiled inwardly and gave her beloved a slight squeeze.

Samantha made a purring sound as she snuggled even closer to her heart's desire.

"I love you Samantha." Alex whispered.

"Hmm, love you, too." Samantha answered.

It never ceased to amaze the dark beauty that no matter how deeply her lover slept, a whispered word of affection always received an answer. It was as though they were bound together no matter what the state of mind. She smiled again and closed her eyes, offering her nightly meditation of thanks to the Goddess for allowing her to - once again - find Samantha. In a world full of lost souls the Goddess had certainly been looking out for their two solitary spirits as they stumbled through life in search of one another.

Alex was now sure the Universe was involved in their meeting and perhaps even in the making of this trip to one of the most mystical and spiritual areas of the United States. Her mother always told her that growth and knowledge were two of the main reasons souls returned to this earth time and time again. Today the daughter was finally beginning to understand the messages her mother began instilling in her from birth, and before joining her mate in sleep, she sent out a silent thank you to the mother she had chosen for this stay on the small planet we call Earth.

Continued in Part 11.



# ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## Part 11

### Chapter 11

Morning came earlier than usual for Samantha, and even before getting out of bed, she felt the exercise from the day before in her legs and feet.

"I never knew I had so many muscles," she complained as she rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up. "You would think with all the practicing I do with Tae Kwon Do and the wall, everything would be limber." Sitting with her legs dangling, she stared at Alex in disbelief. "Why aren't you complaining about a sore body?"

"Guess I'm in better shape than you are." Sapphire eyes sparkled with mischief as the dark-haired beauty walked to the bed and handed Samantha a tube of cream for sore muscles.

"We're going to buy you a pair of hiking boots before we leave for the trip. That's one of your problems. You can't be climbing rocks and stepping on stones all day in those sneakers of yours and not expect your feet and legs to feel the abuse the next day."

"Now you tell me," Samantha whimpered. "At least my arms seem to have taken the exertion without screaming too much. You could have let me in on your little secret **before** I had the sore feet and muscles."

"Sorry." Alex bent down and kissed Samantha's head. "I'm sure the Jacuzzi last night kept the aching to a minimum. Would you like me to kiss the sore spots and make them all better?"

"You do and I can guarantee we will **not** be leaving for a camping trip this morning." She drew her lover closer, her arms wrapped firmly around Alex's waist. "Just you, me, and nature, huh?"

"You got it, kiddo, just the three of us. So, it's time to get up, dressed, and going. We have supplies to pick up from downstairs, a few more things to buy in town, and of course, breakfast."

"Of course, breakfast-that's the most important part," Samantha exclaimed as she let loose of the taller woman and got out of bed.

"I wouldn't go that far, Samantha, but it is high on the list."

After a long discussion over not taking a change of clothing, Alex finally got through to Samantha that they would be roughing it-no bells and whistles, just the necessities, but Samantha continued to beg.

"Bards!" An exasperated Alex gave up, shaking her head. "When you're going to find time to write, I have no idea, but by all means take the tools of the trade. Other than that, are we ready?"

"Yes." Samantha packed her small journal and pens in her backpack and lifted it onto her shoulders.

"Will you be able to travel easily with that on your back?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because we're going to be adding more to it. You know, food, matches, water, survival stuff."

"How much more, Alex?"

"A few pounds, but it'll diminish as we use the supplies up. I'll take most of the weight, but I will need you to carry a little more than you have in there right now. Do you think you'll be able to manage?"

"Sure, it will be on my back so that takes a lot of the weight off. No problem, I can do anything once!"

Since the dining room was already open, it seemed like the best place to eat, and when they were finished with breakfast, they went to the storage room where Gary kept the camping equipment. Everything needed for a weekend with nature was stockpiled in the tiny room. Alex filled

Samantha's backpack first with smaller items such as cooking utensils, a pot, matches, rope, and knife. She then added some packages of freeze-dried food. Each woman picked up a sports bottle with a filter for purifying their drinking and cooking water. The last item Alex loaded onto Samantha's back was a sleeping bag. She then asked if the load felt too heavy or cumbersome to deal with.

"No, I think I'll do just fine. Now I know we're supposed to be roughing it, but I see a roll of camping toilet paper over there; could we please take that and some hand wipes with us?"

The taller woman laughed, but she retrieved the requested items. "Nothing like taking a tenderfoot with me into the depths of nature. How would you ever survive in the forests of the Amazon, far from civilization?"

"Why in Tartarus would I want to survive in the forests of the Amazon? Do I look like a native to you? Besides, Miss Camper-of-the-Year, have you ever gone traipsing through the Amazonian jungle?"

"Actually, no . . . but I think I would survive just fine. I have done some extensive hiking and camping in my day." Sapphire eyes met the question with a hint of rascality. "Besides, you would never be in the Amazon forest alone; I would always be there to protect you."

"My dark hero, always around to save me." There was a smile on the fair face, but the sentiment went heart deep.

"You betcha! Now let's go get a few more goodies to eat and buy you a pair of decent hiking shoes."

On the way out of the room Alex grabbed a flashlight and some batteries. She waved them at Samantha. "Just to be on the safe side--don't want you to be afraid of the dark." She smiled at her lover and closed the door behind her.

It didn't take long to pack up the Jeep, and soon the weekend adventure would begin. Alex informed Gary that they would be somewhere in Secret Canyon and that they would be back by Sunday evening. In the past Alex had kept her hiking destinations secret, but this time she had Samantha to think about as well. She didn't want them to be caught out somewhere with no one knowing where to even begin a search if something went amiss.

A few hours later all the extra supplies were purchased and packed, and Samantha was sporting a new pair of shoes.

"I'm sorry I didn't think about your feet and legs before we got here, Samantha."

"That's okay, I've got the right equipment now," Samantha answered.

"Yes, but you should have been able to wear them for a few days and break them in before needing them so desperately. At least the salesperson promised that they fit properly and won't

cause blisters. He will be one sorry so-and-so if they do." The dark-haired beauty put her hand on the smaller woman's thigh. "We're almost there. I know you're going to love this place. There are all sorts of caves riddled throughout the area and it's so off the beaten path that there are hardly any other hikers around."

Alex turned onto a dirt road with a sign that read FR 152.

"Just a few more miles and we'll reach the parking lot where I told Gary we'd leave the Jeep. In case of an emergency, he'll know where to begin looking."

Panic filled Samantha's eyes as they flashed up to meet her lover's. "Emergency?"

"Samantha, I don't anticipate any problems, but we are going to be out in nature, and it would be stupid to not have at least one person know where we started out."

The blonde relaxed back into her seat. "You're right, of course; it's just that the word 'emergency' sounds so scary."

"Okay, sorry for the use of such a strong word. I forgot how easily words affect you, my bard."

From where they were parked they could barely see a sign reading "Secret Canyon #121."

"We're here. Let's get packed up and on the go."

They helped each other on with the backpacks and sleeping bags, making sure to attach their filled water bottles to their pant loops. Alex's camping shorts pockets were filled with small incidentals: matches, Swiss Army knife, snakebite kit, and compass. Samantha's pockets were filled with hard candies, antiseptic wipes, lip balm, and insect bite ointment. The blonde made sure the toilet tissue, her journal, and a pen were all easily accessible. It was quite obvious what each woman's priorities were.

The path was fairly easy to follow in the beginning, leading them through tall grass scattered throughout with yellow blanketflower. A little further on, after crossing a dry wash laced with jimsonweed, they passed a small stream bubbling merrily along. They were constantly surrounded by the beautiful red rock cliffs that rose high above everything else and enclosed them in a world of wonder and beauty.

A short distance down the path forked, and the two women decided to take the trail that looked less traveled. It had them weaving and twisting along the rocky cliffs, interspersed with scarlet creeper. Since they had nowhere special in mind to go, they paced themselves, enjoying the fragrance of the seasonal flowers, which included the blue machaeranthera with its brilliant azure petals and yellow center. If they listened closely they could hear bluejays and painted redstarts, while occasionally catching a glimpse of a native black hawk flying high overhead. After a while the path wound back around and then started to descend, plunging them into a section of deep woods.

"I don't think I've ever seen so much beauty in one place," Samantha murmured as they walked side by side through the pines. "I mean, there's the lake and woods in Washington and the ocean and beaches in California, but this is so different."

"It's like being in a world that civilization has yet to find, isn't it?"

"That's it exactly, Alex. It's like we're explorers; the first ones here to see all these wonders of nature."

The tall trees filtered the sunlight, and in Samantha's bardic imagination, she spotted many a fairy ring as she and Alex walked through the fragrant woods. The sounds of the woodland birds created a symphony of nature as the lovers walked unhurriedly through the lush undergrowth on the forest floor.

About the time Samantha's stomach started rumbling, they found themselves at the end of the path, which headed into an almost dry creek bed. Had it not been for the daily showers, the water would more than likely have dried up long ago. Alex looked at her watch.

"I see you managed to bring that little item of civilization along with you?" Samantha teased.

Acknowledging the sarcasm by merely a raised eyebrow and a smile, Alex asked, "Do you want to stop for some lunch now or continue on down the wash and see where it leads?"

"I don't know. What time is it?"

"You want me to cheat and look at this timepiece on my arm that you've just been sarcastic about or give you the time by the sun?"

"No fair, Alex, I already saw you look at your watch. We can play that little game later in the afternoon when I'm sure you haven't already cheated."

"Clever girl, aren't you? Believe it or not, we've been walking around for about two and a half hours. It's a little after one. We could have some lunch and rest for a bit and then travel back up toward the cliffs if you want."

"Hey, I'm just along for the hike; you're the tour guide. Time really does fly when you're having fun! I wouldn't have thought so much time had elapsed. I'll go along with whatever you say."

"Oh, that can be risky--whatever I say?"

"Within reason." The blonde smiled over at her lover.

"There you go, putting restrictions." Alex stopped and took her backpack off, then helped Samantha off with hers. "I'm really not a tour guide here, Samantha. This is virgin territory for me as well; I've never been back through these woods."

"That's fantastic! Now we're someplace where neither one of us has ever been before. I like that idea; it makes this even more special."

"It doesn't take much to make you happy, does it?" Alex gave her lover a kiss on the cheek. "Seriously, Samantha, I do know that sometimes, though it seems we've been traveling forever and the time speeds by, the trails occasionally backtrack. So even if it takes us two to three hours to get somewhere, there's always the possibility that another path would take us back quicker. I've been trying to keep an eye on where we've gone so we don't get totally lost."

"Getting lost would definitely not be a fun way to spend the weekend."

"Let me tell you now so I don't forget later." Alex pointed to one of the large red rock towers. "See that turret up there, Samantha?"

Samantha's eyes followed the pointing finger. "Yes."

"Okay, the Jeep is parked directly south of that spire, so if anything . . ."

"It's enough to know that it's there, Alex. I'm sure I won't ever have to use that information."

The following couple of hours were spent having a leisurely lunch, talking, and enjoying the scenery. After eating, the women piled up a bunch of pine needles and threw one of the sleeping bags over them, making a soft area to lie down and talk some more. During one particularly quiet moment, Alex made a quick move to sit and put her fingers to her mouth to keep Samantha from speaking. Then she motioned for the blonde to sit up and pointed down the creek while leaning over and whispering into her lover's ear, "Look down there to the right, Samantha, an entire family of deer."

It didn't take Samantha long to see what her lover was pointing at. Not more than fifty feet away stood a doe and two fawns, nibbling on the shrubbery. A bit further down the women could barely see the antlers of a buck.

"They're absolutely beautiful," Samantha whispered back to Alex. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Alex's answer to the thank you was a sweet kiss to her lover's cheek. She pulled Samantha back down onto the bedding beside her. Baby kisses caressed the fair cheeks that were pink from the afternoon sun. "Ya know, Mom once told me, in one of our mother-and-daughter talks, about the way she felt when she and Kelley first got together. I always thought she was exaggerating about the feeling of never wanting to let Kelley out of her sight. I used to think to myself that surely she couldn't mean that she wanted to have physical contact with her constantly. Now I know exactly what she was trying to convey to me. Whenever you're near, I feel the need to be beside you, to touch you, caress you, and to tell you how much I love you." Alex drew Samantha closer and kissed her passionately. "You know, I've had good sex before . . ."

"Oh, you have, have you?" the blonde teased.

"Samantha, I'm being serious."

"Yeah," blonde locks nodded in affirmation, "I know."

"But with you it's almost like . . . an obsession. It's not just sex, it's nourishment." Alex sighed. "Now listen to who's sounding deep and bardic."

"I know what you're saying, Alex; I feel it, too. It's like when you're touching me, we're complete."

"Exactly," Alex agreed.

For minutes they lay quietly side by side, facing each other and simply looking into each other's eyes and letting their hearts do the talking.

Finally, two small hands could no longer keep still and began to roam the taller woman's body. When Samantha slipped her fingers under Alex's shorts and squeezed the firm round buttocks, the raven-haired beauty felt the material between her legs become suddenly damp as a shudder ran through her body, and she started to sit up.

"Samantha, as much as I want to . . ."

The smaller woman ignored the protestation and pushed Alex onto her back. She rolled on top of her and muttered into her lover's ear, "My turn." Then she sat up and straddled her mate while she unbuttoned and unzipped Alex's shorts.

Two strong hands quickly clasped the smaller ones. "Samantha, we need to keep moving if we're going to find a place to make camp before sunset. You want to see the sunset, don't you?"

"Nice try, Alex." Samantha jerked her hands away. "We have plenty of time; this won't take long. Consider it my dessert." She slipped a hand between the material and her lover's body, bypassing the curly locks and heading for the moistened area below.

She smiled and gently pushed on the center of her lover's passion. "Now, I'm sure it won't take long," she teased. Slipping one finger gingerly between the nether lips and up inside the cave of desire, with her thumb she gently massaged the already growing nub above the entrance. "Don't you think we ought to get these shorts off? They're awfully wet, Alex. You don't want to chafe; you don't seem to have any underwear on to absorb the dampness." Again Samantha grinned, and seeing no signs of resistance, removed the hindering clothing.

Alex had already taken her outer shirt off and was wearing only a sleeveless tee, but seconds later that, too, was lying on the ground beside them.

"You know, I've never made love in the woods," Samantha began, then looked over to where the family of deer was still grazing, "especially with a live audience." She giggled before leaning

over and taking one of her lover's now hard nipples in her mouth. "Ah. Dessert."

Under the watchful and warm eyes of the afternoon sun and with the help of a gentle breeze to cool their passions, the two made love beneath the tall pines, oblivious to the stares from the animals unfamiliar with the mating habits of humans.

After the women had taken the time to appreciate each other, they lay on their backs, drinking in the fresh air and playing imagination games with the clouds.

Alex was the first to suggest they dress and get started. They had spent more time than anticipated having "lunch."

The duo followed the creek bank for a little while longer and filled their half-emptied water bottles with the crystal-clear liquid. Almost an hour had passed as they continued through the woods trying to identify the ferns, flowers, and wild mushrooms they encountered along the way. Soon the wooded area gave way to a small grove of red-barked manzanita trees. Searching the area, Alex spotted what looked like a natural trail that led further up into the rocks.

"I've always appreciated the pine trees and ferns more than these little buggers," the dark-haired beauty mumbled, stepping around one of the small trees. "Be careful not to get too close; they enjoy eating clothing and love the taste of skin," she warned.

"Will do, especially since you didn't let me bring any change of clothes."

"Don't go there, Samantha! I might just have to introduce you to a manzanita tree." Alex gave the "I'm only kidding" sign, and they continued on toward the cliff facing.

"Look up there, Samantha," Alex pointed a little way in front and above them. "That looks like it might be a nice size ledge and a cave."

"What about bears, Alex? We saw deer here, so I know there's wildlife. Are there bears?"

"None to really speak about. In a few of the areas there have been brown bear sightings, but I don't think this region is one of them."

"You don't think?"

"Samantha, if you're uncomfortable with doing this, we still have time to head back to the Jeep, and we can sleep in a nice soft bed instead of on the hard ground, out in the open air, under the stars, with not another soul around . . ."

"Okay, okay, I definitely get the picture. No bears to be afraid of. Gotcha!"

Within minutes they had started to climb the face of the rocks that would lead them up to a ledge approximately six feet above their heads. Luckily for them the facing was not slick, but had many handgrips and crevices. Samantha went first and Alex watched carefully each advance the



smaller woman made.

"You're really rather good at that, you know, Samantha?" the raven-haired beauty shouted up to her mate before joining her in the climb. "You're almost there. I'm going to go ahead and start."

Hand and foot coordination was definitely a plus when trying to climb the irregular cliff wall. When Alex pulled herself onto the ledge, Samantha was sitting there taking a picture.

"Did you get my best angle?" Alex asked as she finished scrambling onto the ledge.

"Every angle is your best," Samantha said. "Just look at the view from here. You were right; a little longer down on the floor of the forest and we would have missed the sunset."

"Thanks for the bit of confidence. I think there's plenty of time now to set up a camp. This is a nice size ledge, and it looks like there's even an indentation we can use for a fire pit."

The women took off their backpacks and deposited everything they needed for the evening into a pile close to the fire pit. With part of the water from their bottles, they reconstituted the evening meal. All that was left to do was to heat it. Together they scavenged around and found enough felled wood to support a fire, and while Alex was busy priming for the cooking stage, Samantha sat down with her journal.

"I can either see Bell Rock from here, or there is another formation that is very close to it in structure." Samantha pointed to the east and Alex followed the blonde's direction with her eyes.

"I'm not really sure, Samantha."

"Well, I've had this poem running through my head since the day we visited there, and I think I'll write it out while you're finishing up there. Is that okay with you?"

"Sure, there's nothing you can do to help. The kindling has caught, and we just need enough of a flame to start cooking."

Samantha sat down with her journal in her lap. The rhyme had been flowing through her head all day and it was a relief to get it down on paper.

Bell Rock Rock

I sat within the silence in the blazing autumn sun

A concert was beginning for an audience of one

My soul began to listen to a different drummer's beat

I found myself a-rocking in the sweltering autumn heat

'Twas a song just written for me, and my soul began to sway

Though my ears could hear no music, I could feel it anyway

The energy ran through me as each note was deftly played

Now the melody escapes me, but the feeling will not fade

The bard finished writing, sighed deeply, and put down her pen. She picked up the journal and reread the poem.

"Want to hear what I wrote, Alex?"

"Sure . . . you sound like I wouldn't want to hear it, why?"

"I don't know, because it's poetry?"

"I want to hear anything you pen, Samantha. Go ahead, read it to me while I put these pots over the fire. It shouldn't take long to heat everything up."

The blonde read the title out loud and then stopped and tilted her head, as if listening to something almost inaudible. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"That drumming sound."

"No. All I heard was the title of your poem."

"Okay, must have been the way the wind was whistling past my face." The small blonde began again. "Bell Rock Rock . . . there . . . there it is again, Alex . . . listen."

Alex tilted her head, closed her eyes, and concentrated. "I don't hear anything, honey. Why don't you just go ahead and finish the poem. Maybe nature is accompanying you." She smiled in the direction of her mate.

"You're smiling, but it's kinda giving me the creeps." The blonde shivered and then looked again at the bit of creativity in her hand. "Okay, here goes . . ."

For the final time, Samantha began the poem elicited by the peace and serenity of the area. Again she heard the slight beating of rhythmic drums, muted instead of echoed by the surrounding canyon. She did not look up until she had uttered the last word of the poem and then looked into the stunned face of her lover.

"Was it *that* bad?" The poet questioned.

"Um . . . no . . . um . . . the poem was really good, Samantha; it captured the magic that surrounds this area." Alex looked down and stirred the pot of vegetable stew.

"So, what's with the inability to answer then, Alex? Why the weird look, huh?" Samantha already knew the answer to her question; she just wanted Alex to admit to it.

"I guess it's just that when you were reading your poem . . . I . . . nah . . . it was the power of suggestion."

"What was the power of suggestion? Just tell me." Samantha walked over to the fire and placed her hand on Alex's arm. "You heard it too, didn't you?"

The taller woman nodded yes, crooking her head to listen to the wind. "I don't hear anything now." She looked down into eyes confused as her own.

"I heard it the entire time I was reading. It was as though the beat was following my words." Samantha shivered and held her arms out for her lover to see the goose flesh that was covering them. "It gave me the willies! What do you supposed caused it?"

"Probably the way the wind was rushing though the trees, hitting the caves, or bouncing off the rocks."

"Yeah, right. Alex, the wind does not make **drum** sounds."

"Well, maybe there's another hiking party somewhere in the canyon today and they're drummers. Yeah, that sounds reasonable." Alex smiled, thinking perhaps she had finally hit on a logical explanation. The she laughed nervously. "Listen to us, thinking we're the only visitors to this entire area. I'll bet that's what it was, drummers practicing their Indian drumming."

"Is that so?" The blonde was none too sure of Alex's certainty. "Then, oh wise camper, tell me why we don't hear them anymore?"

The air was hushed and silent as the two strained their ears to catch the distant sound of drumming . . . of any sound . . . but now, not even the birds were singing.

"Whatever, Samantha." Alex waved it off. "Let's just wait and see if it returns again before the evening's over." Quickly changing the topic, she pointed to their bowls. "I think this stew is warm enough to eat, wanna bring those over?"

They sat together with legs dangling over the ledge, pointing out what was most important to each of them. Samantha gave Alex an incredulous look when the dark-haired woman took the bowls and wiped them out with leaves.

"I know we're roughing it, Alex, but . . ."

"Samantha, we're going to need the water in our bottles for drinking, not for washing dishes,

unless you want to climb back down to the creek bed to clean up tonight?"

"No," the blonde admitted. "It's just I've never had my bowl cleaned with a leaf before. You going to do the same with the pot?"

"Yes, that's what I intended. They really get fairly clean this way, look." She held out one of the bowls for her lover to inspect.

"Not surprisingly, Alex, you're right." When the pot was clean, the blonde placed the bowls inside it. "It's so quiet out here. At home, there's always the rush of the waves beating on the shore. Here there's a silence so still you can hear your heartbeat."

"This is beautiful country. Why don't we figure where we want to sleep and put the sleeping bags down and then look around a little before sunset?"

"Great idea."

The choice was between setting the bedding inside the cave or outside on the ledge. Samantha wanted the full impact of sleeping under the stars, so they agreed to place their bedrolls close to the entrance in case it rained but just outside the mouth of the alcove. Alex had a small battery-operated camping lantern that she turned on as they slowly entered the cavern. When proceeding through the entrance, the statuesque brunette found the need to duck, but once she was inside, the area opened up, showing ceilings that reached slightly beyond her six feet. Beyond the irregularly shaped cave the women entered, they spotted two tunnels leading further into the heart of the red rock. One of the passages went forward with a sharp turn to the left and the other forward and just slightly to the right.

"You know, it's weird that these caves are so close to the cliff dwellings we saw, and yet there is no acknowledgement of ancient habitats in this canyon."

"I would imagine this might have been more of a spiritual place," Alex commented.

"Why would you think that?"

"I don't know." The dark-haired beauty shrugged her shoulders as the two continued to walk toward the left turn. "It just seemed like a logical reason to me, I guess."

"Look at this, Alex." Samantha bent down and picked up a stick that had some kind of moss stuck to it. "Kind of resembles a torch, don'cha think?"

"Yes," Alex said. "It would be a great torch if it's dry enough and the stuff on it doesn't burn too quickly. Want to try it and see? It would save batteries." She took the torch from Samantha and used the matches she had in her camp shorts. They were in luck; the moss was dry enough to catch with the first try.

"That's great. It really throws a lot of light into the cave," Samantha said. "Where do you think

something like this would lead?" she asked, pointing further down the tunnel.

"It seems to be following the outer rim of the mountain."

The passage was fairly level with perhaps a slight decline. As they continued to walk, Alex began to notice that the passage was narrowing. "Looks like we might be running out of tunnel up here a little way. Isn't it remarkable how these rocks are spotted with caves and tunnels like this? Unfortunately, this one looks barren." She turned and spun the torch around to see if there was any writing on the walls. There was none, so she asked Samantha if she had had enough adventuring for the evening and if she was ready to see the sunset.

"I've already cheated and looked at my watch," Alex confessed. "We should have just enough time to get back out there before old Sol goes down."

Alex was definitely right on the time frame; just as they were emerging from the cave, they caught the last glimpses of the sun as it began its descent below the rocks of Secret Canyon. The brunette carefully extinguished the torch so they would be able to use it again the following day when they explored the other side of the cave. After placing it back inside the cave, she walked over, stood behind her lover, and draped her arms over the smaller woman's shoulders.

"So, will this do for one of your memorable sunsets?"

"Most definitely, Alex." Samantha leaned back onto Alex's chest. "But it goes so quickly once it hits a certain point."

"That it does, Samantha, almost like it was dropping from the sky." Alex could still smell the fragrance of cologne in Samantha's hair as she inhaled fully. "I love the way you smell."

The blonde giggled. "Oh, yeah. Especially after I've been walking around in the woods the entire day. I must smell fragrant."

"As a matter of fact, you do," Alex countered as she drew her lover close and sniffed. "You smell like fresh air and pine."

Unfortunately, there were no pine needles to soften the hard ground the sleeping bags were now unrolled on for the evening. The women sat down and Alex brought out the wineskin she carried in her backpack.

"Open your mouth, Samantha."

Being quite experienced at aiming the stream of liquid that was quickly escaping from the skin, she maneuvered it so that not a drop was lost as it found its way into Samantha's mouth.

"Ah ... that tastes marvelous. What a way to end an evening. Watching a sunset made for the movies, sitting at the top of the world, drinking the nectar of the gods, and all with the person I most want to be with in the entire universe. Who could ask for anything more?"

Alex grinned, took a drink of wine, and edged closer to Samantha. "My sentiments exactly," she agreed. "I take it you think today was successful?"

"Absolutely!" The blonde beamed from ear to ear. "This is beautiful country out here in the middle of nowhere, Alex."

"That it is, my love, that it is," Alex agreed. She gave Samantha a mouthful of wine and took another for herself. "Just how tired are you?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe just lying back and doing a little star-gazing."

"Sounds good to me," Samantha replied. "Astronomy was one of my favorite subjects in high school."

Once the sun fell below the rocks of the canyon, the sky darkened quickly. Before long the stars were peeking through the velvet sky like so many tiny spotlights.

Samantha turned to Alex with a serious expression. "I don't want to spoil the evening, but I have a question."

"Okay?"

"Do you think we'll be bothered by any animals, sleeping out here in the open like this?"

There was no hesitation in Alex's answer. "We're pretty safe up this high, Samantha. If we were sleeping on the ground, we might expect to have night visitors, but not up here. Besides, I'm here to protect you."

Samantha giggled and put her arm around Alex's waist. "Silly me, I forgot. At least I feel better after asking."

"Good," Alex exclaimed. She then changed the subject as she began the heavenly discussion by pointing into the night sky. "There's the Big Dipper."

"That may be the common name for it, but what did ancient civilizations call the constellation?" Samantha did the arched eyebrow look with a slightly sarcastic grin as she gazed into Alex's face.

"Did I ever mention that astrology was **not** one of my most studied of subjects?" Alex asked.

The smaller woman laughed and Alex held her close while they looked up into the evening sky. "Why don't you fill me in on the folklore and all that stuff? I'm a captive audience."

"I can do that," Samantha boasted. "Well, at least you had no trouble finding it. Let's see, the ancient Greeks referred to it as the Bear, and the Romans called it Ursa Major or the Great Bear; I guess they agreed on something, huh? Let me think ... I'm sure you already know that it's one of the most visible and best known of the constellations and that it shows up in the Northern Hemisphere all year long. The story goes that Callisto was changed by Zeus into a bear because of jealousy and put into the night sky. I don't know much more about that one."

"Well, that happens to be the only one I do know anything about. The last time I was here in Sedona, I was speaking to an old Lakota Indian at one of those vista points I told you about, where the Indians sell handmade jewelry. It was getting close to dusk and we could already see some of the stars peeking through the early evening sky. She told me that the Lakota call the constellation Wichakiyuhapi." She laughed and apologized for the possible mispronunciation.

"As if I would know the difference," Samantha giggled back.

"Anyhow, that name for the constellation means 'Dipper.' They consider it the dipper used to carry water for the sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies that take place up in the sky. When an Indian dies, the same dipper is used to carry their spiritual essence across the Milky Way, which they call the 'Road of Spirits,' and deposit it at its final destination in the spirit world. The very same configuration of stars is called by different names as they perform different functions for the Lakota men and women."

"Wow." Samantha looked up at the constellation and tried to imagine having her spirit body carried across the stars as it journeyed to its final destination. "That's really interesting."

Alex squeezed Samantha gently. "That's all I know, so I guess it's your turn again."

"Okay," the blonde chimed in. "My favorite is Cassiopeia. I'm sure you've heard of her."

"Yes," Alex admitted. "But I don't know the story behind the lady in the rocking chair." She pointed up into the now dark night sky. "Actually, I can even point her out."

Samantha followed Alex's fingers and smiled. "You got it; the great big 'W' in the sky. Some call it a rocking chair, but in mythology, it's labeled a throne."

She sighed deeply and then began her story. "Okay, here we go back to the Greeks. Queen Cassiopeia was married to King Cepheus of Æthiopia, and they had a beautiful daughter by the name of Andromeda. Now all the stories differ a little from here, except for the fact that they all maintain that Queen Cassiopeia was an extremely vain woman. Some say that she bragged about her own beauty, some say it was about Andromeda's beauty, and others state that she boasted about both them. One day while they were walking along the shoreline, she went a little overboard and gloated that their beauty far surpassed even that of the sea nymphs. One of the water creatures overheard the boast and went running to Poseidon. The angry god threatened to send a raging flood upon the land and a sea monster, Cetus, to retaliate. King Cepheus was beside himself and asked an oracle what he could do to stop the slaughter of his people because of his wife's vanity. He was told he must sacrifice his daughter by stripping her naked-"

"That sounds interesting," Alex interjected.

"Alex!"

"I'm sorry, go on."

"Where was I? Okay, he had to strip her naked and chain her to the rocks by the shoreline, where the monster would come and devour her. But the sacrifice was thwarted when Perseus, with his winged sandals, came flying over her on his way home from slaying Medusa. Instantly he fell in love with the beautiful Andromeda. He spotted the monster Cetus coming toward her and vowed to save her if he could have her hand in marriage. King Cepheus agreed, and Perseus, using the gorgon's head, turned the monster to stone. When Cassiopeia and Cepheus died, Poseidon gave them a place of honor in the sky near one another. Athena placed Perseus and Andromeda among the stars when they died. The lovers were placed near Andromeda's parents, the king and queen. Of course Cetus, the sea monster, was already up there waiting for the beautiful woman he never got to devour in life, and to this day, he chases Andromeda around the sky with Perseus, carrying the Medusa's head, continuing to guard his lover."

"So then Cassiopeia never was really punished for being a vain bitch?" Alex asked at the end of the story. "She got put up into the heavens anyway?"

"Kind of. Some say Poseidon's punishment was to humiliate her and condemn her to spend half of eternity upside down. That's why sometimes the constellation looks like a 'W' and at other times it looks like an 'M'. When she is upside down, that's a very undignified position for a queen to be in."

"Oh, I see." Alex snickered. "Could it be the direction you're looking from when you stare up into the night sky?"

"Alex! Must you always look at everything from the practical side? It's a myth."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. Point out the lovers to me, will you?"

Samantha studied the now pitch-black sky, tracing the stars with her fingers. "There they are." She pointed in the direction she wanted Alex to look. "See, there's Cassiopeia, and if you just move a smidgen over, you can see the two lovers."

"Enough about the stars, how about the two lovers down here on this ledge?" Alex turned to face Samantha and pulled the smaller woman into an embrace. "I would rather concentrate on the relationship at hand than to go back in time to the days of gods and warriors."

Samantha eagerly wrapped her arms around the taller woman's neck. "You have my undivided attention," she hummed.

The night was cool, but not cold, and the anticipation of making love beneath the stars produced



warming thoughts.

"Want to get naked under the constellations?" Alex whispered into Samantha's ear.

Her answer was nonverbal as the blonde changed her position and began to unbutton Alex's shorts.

"I guess that's a yes." Alex pulled away and quickly finished taking her shoes, socks, shorts, and top off. She turned to help Samantha with her undressing only to find that the blonde was lying back on the sleeping bags devoid of clothing.

"Now that's a sight to be placed into the heavens for eternity," Alex declared before she positioned herself on top of the naked beauty.

"I thought I would be cold, but I think you could take the chill out of the arctic night air." Samantha giggled. "Did we come out here to be with nature or to discover how many new and unusual places we could find to make love?"

"I think the answer to that is, yes!" Alex ran her hands down the smooth curves of her lover's body, feeling the skin ripple when she touched a particularly erogenous spot. There was no giving of the ground beneath them, so they would have to take precautions not to end up with bruises by the time they were finished.

"I don't know if this is just an excuse, but having you out here in the wilderness all to myself is definitely a turn-on," Alex murmured into her lover's ear.

Samantha smiled up into eyes that showered love down upon her. "I don't know either, but I feel the same way. I think the scenery brings out the animal in us." She again placed her arms around Alex's neck and drew her into an embrace.

Lips, marginally chapped from exposure to the elements all day, ignored the slight tactile discomfort as they quickly proceeded into the realm of desire. Long, muscular fingers played harmoniously down the blonde's torso, causing miniscule peaks to appear wherever they roamed.

A symphony of moans and breathless whispers filled the night air as the seduction continued.

Currents of electricity traveled through both bodies as a game of tag and tell ignited primordial cravings.

"People try to kid themselves as to why they're attracted to each other," Alex interjected between kisses. "The animal instincts we still harbor are more a part of our DNA than we usually care to acknowledge. I'm intoxicated by the mere thought of you." She kissed the smaller woman's shoulder. "The smell of you is stimulating," she whispered into Samantha's ear. "And your scent grows stronger the more impassioned you become, driving me absolutely crazy with a hunger that needs to be fed."

Her body remained stationary while her hands traveled skillfully down the pliable body beneath her, coming to rest on the golden mound of fleece. As one hand encompassed the entire area and slowly applied pressure, the raven-haired beauty added, "We aren't all that different from the creatures of the wild, Samantha. We have merely been tamed into thinking we're civilized."

Her fingers traced an outline around the mouth of Samantha's nether lips as they tenderly begged leave to enter into the moist den of pleasure that resided therein. Seconds later admittance had been granted and Samantha's body rocked, gently at first and then fiercely as climax became inevitable.

Straddling her lover's thigh, the taller woman pushed her passion against the warm skin, sliding up and down as her fingers continued with their in-and-out motions, seeking to quench Samantha's thirst and her own simultaneously.

"Tell me, Samantha, let me hear you add your voice to the forest rhapsody. You're mine--tell me--tell the world," Alex pleaded.

Inner muscles tightened around the givers of pleasure, and Samantha's body let loose a flood of love's nectar. Nails dug deeply into the skin on Alex's back as a bodily shudder began. Total release and the outcry of one singular word "Alex!" rang through the canyon.

"Alex," Samantha repeated, breathing heavily. "Oh, Alex. I am--I am yours." She opened her eyes and searched for the emotion behind the look that greeted her; it was heart wrenching.

"Are those tears glistening in the moonlight?" Samantha questioned as she gently wiped one away. "They are . . ."

"Tears of disbelief and joy," Alex admitted, grabbing and kissing the small damp hand. "I love you, Samantha."

"Disbelief? Why would you say disbelief?"

"Because I could never have imagined that I would be at the top of the world, making love to the most beautiful woman in it, with her shouting that she loved me and that she was mine. If I died tonight, I'd die a happy woman."

Samantha pushed Alex over and sat up, staring down into the face she loved. "Well, if you died tonight I would be **anything** but a happy woman. I would be a miserable wreck. I don't want to ever hear that little statement again, okay?"

"I was just trying to tell you how happy I am. Come here." Alex pulled Samantha back down on top of her and encased her in loving arms. "Never leave me, Samantha, promise."

"Alex, promises are--"

"Just say the words, please. Promise."

"Okay, I promise, Alex." An impish grin came across the blonde's face. "In fact, maybe I should add, you'd have to pay to get rid of me."

"Then I guess my fortune is safe, because I will never pay you to leave." Alex chuckled.

The lovers embraced, and when Samantha started to shiver from the cool breeze, Alex suggested they crawl inside their sleeping bags.

Safely nestled in each other's arms, they stared silently up at the night sky. Traces of love remained on their bodies and in their thoughts. A long day of physical activity, both adventurous and emotional, relegated the lovers to the state of exhaustion. They closed their eyes and slept.

Continued in Part 12.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## Part 12

### Chapter 12

The first rays of the morning sun sparkled through the canyon and tickled the eyes of the two sleepers. Almost simultaneously they opened their eyes to greet the morning.

"I would say I slept like a rock," Samantha said, "but I do believe the correct statement would be I slept **on** a rock!"

Alex smiled and kissed her lover good morning. "I, for one, slept very good for sleeping on a rock. How 'bout you?"

"Can't say that I tossed and turned much," Samantha admitted, giggling. She stood and stretched while Alex reclined on the sleeping bag and watched, a contented smile gracing her face.

"You can make the simplest maneuvers a work of art; do you realize that?"

Samantha looked down and grinned. "Don't be ridiculous."

Alex sat up, grabbed Samantha's hands, and pulled her down onto her lap. "Good morning, my Destiny. Last night was beautiful, and today's starting out with the best eye candy a girl could ask for. We could start out the morning the same way we ended the night."

"I don't think so, Alex. Seriously, aren't you just a little sore in places you didn't know you had until now?"

"Maybe, but I'll get over it." Alex pulled Samantha closer and kissed her passionately.

Arms encircled her neck as the blonde reciprocated and kissed her lover back. Then she pulled away slightly and looked Alex in the face.

"We have a full day of hiking and exploring to do, my love. I thoroughly enjoyed last night and wouldn't have changed a second of it, but I do want to sleep in a nice soft bed this evening, so what do you say to getting some breakfast and then seeing what's in the other tunnel inside the cave?"

"If you expect me to keep my hands off you, I suggest we dress and then make breakfast. It's either that or you **are** breakfast."

Samantha giggled, then stood up and paraded, naked, under the morning sky. Just as Alex was about to get up and come after her, the blonde grabbed her clothes and pulled on her underwear. "Seriously . . ."

"You don't know how to be serious," the taller woman responded. "You're a tease, Samantha Riley."

"I know," Sam smiled. "Can't help myself. Blame it on the beautiful dawn, the clean air, the color of the sky that matches your eyes . . ." She took a deep breath and stared over at Alex. "Better yet, blame it on the person who needs to be blamed. Blame it on you."

"Me? What did I do?" Alex asked.

"You made me fall in love with you. You changed my world and added a zest for life that I never felt before."

"And for that I get teased?"

"You betcha!" Samantha grinned at the beautiful brunette, all the while continuing to get dressed and avoid body contact.

Mentally concurring that Samantha was right and that they needed to get started if they were to spend the day exploring before heading back toward the Jeep, Alex picked up her clothes and followed suit.

There was no warmth left in the fire from the evening before and the women agreed it would be a waste of time to rekindle it. A cold breakfast would do just fine. Before long, they were packed up and ready to start exploring.

"I'm not sure if the tunnel will lead us down and away from here or up higher, Samantha. Do you want to leave the backpacks here at the entrance to the cave and come back for them, or take them with us?"

"You're more of the expert in this field, Alex."

"Not really, this is uncharted territory. Do you want to go ahead and just leave the gear here and come back for it?"

"Sure, the day's young."

"Great."

The women set the backpacks down and took just what they thought they might need in the cave. Samantha insisted on taking a mini-pack with enough food for lunch, just in case they got hungry before making it back out to the ledge. Alex smiled at her partner. "We wouldn't want to get overly hungry, now would we?"

"You know how it is; when you're someplace where you can't get anything to eat, you always get hungrier than if you were surrounded by food. Tell ya what, I'll even carry it."

"No need for that," Alex countered as she took the small backpack from the blonde. "Come on, let's get started."

Leading the way, Alex picked up and re-ignited the torch they had used the day before and the exploration began.

A short way into the cave the lovers were glad they left the heavy gear behind. They found themselves on a slight incline that seemed to be leading them more toward the inner reaches of the cliff.

"Looks like we made the right decision," Alex commented. "I'm sure we're not going down."

"Hey, Alex, here's some more of that moss stuff for the torch; it must be some kind of air fern." Samantha peeled a wad of sticky substance off the wall of the cave and handed it to Alex. The spot where it had adhered to the wall was green and slightly spongy, but where it stuck out into the tunnel the plant was drier. Alex wrapped it around the diminishing torch and it immediately caught and illuminated.

"You found that just in time, Samantha. We would have been forced to use the flashlight in a few minutes."

Looking at the walls of the passage, Alex noticed a notched area that looked almost like an arrow pointing in the direction they were traveling.

"I didn't notice any of these before." She walked over to the wall and rubbed her hand over it. "Did you?"

"No, but the shadows could have kept us from seeing them."

"This looks like a directional sign," Alex mumbled almost inaudibly. She was busy looking for another arrow when Samantha's voice interrupted her search.

"Listen, Alex, I think I hear water dripping."

The torchbearer stopped and the two campers listened.

"Can you hear it, Alex?"

"Yes, but it's very faint; it must be quite a distance away."

"Either that or it's just a trickle."

As they moved further down the corridor, Alex found herself having to duck slightly in places as the ceiling began to dip and curve. Now they heard the dripping sound constantly, and the arrows on the walls were closer together as the tunnel ventured off in different directions.

"I hope there aren't arrows anywhere else or we may find ourselves walking in circles," Samantha said, a little less cheerfully than she intended to.

Alex looked around, picked up a loose stone, and struck it on the side of the wall, making a mark. "I'm fairly sure of our directions up to here; why don't we make a mark occasionally just to be sure?"

"Sounds like an excellent idea to this camper," Samantha agreed and breathed a smile of relief. Unfortunately, she was beginning to believe the last statement she had made.

About six feet ahead of them the tunnel forked. The path to the left seemed to be somehow illuminated. The closer they got, the more they could see that it was beginning to expand into what looked like a rotunda.

"Wow!" Samantha whispered. Her mouth dropped open as they entered an enormous room with pinpricks of light seeping in through various holes in the ceiling.

"Would you-" Samantha stopped short as her words were repeated back to her in the still air.

The blonde smiled up at her mate and tried again. "This is absolutely-"

Again the walls echoed her voice as she spoke.

"Maybe if you whisper," Alex encouraged in a soft voice that did not seem to make the walls respond.

"Yeah, it seems that whispering works," Samantha whispered. "This is beautiful. Look over here, Alex," she coaxed. She moved across the room toward what looked like a small altar. "I can't believe no one has ever been in here. I would have guessed that all these caves would have been explored."

"Maybe the cave we entered was concealed before, or maybe the ledge was inaccessible. Why do you think they call it Secret Canyon?"

"I guess that's as good a reason as any," Samantha muttered on her way to examine what appeared to be a naturally formed stage and altar. "Look at this, Alex; there are designs all over the base of this platform."

The two women examined the drawings and geometric patterns.

"Just look at the intricacy of these designs, Alex," Samantha exclaimed, trying to keep her excitement quiet. "I think we should tell someone in authority about this cave when we get back, don't you?"

"Yes," Alex agreed. "This definitely needs to be protected as another treasure from the past. It gives me an eerie feeling to be the first one of our time to see these relics; how about you?"

"Oh, yeah! See the goose bumps?" Sam giggled quietly while exposing her arms to Alex.

"From the way the sunlight is streaming through the small holes in the ceiling, I would venture to say we were near the top of this structure." Tilting her head to the side and listening, Alex commented that the water sounds seemed to be getting closer.

When she accidentally leaned against the altar, a loud creaking sound came from behind her and the room was suddenly flooded with light.

"Alex." Samantha pointed to the area of the brightness. "It looks like you opened up a hidden passageway or room."

"Well, we're here to explore, no time like the present."

The dark-haired beauty took her lover's hand and they walked into a brilliantly lit area. It became quite apparent to them where the water sounds had been coming from. Not believing their eyes, they beheld a small waterfall. It cascaded down to the level on which they were standing, where the water emptied into a tiny pond with rivulets branching out and downward. The entire area was speckled with pines. Glancing up, the two women could feel the warmth of the sun shining through several irregular openings, each about the size of a basketball and with foliage spreading across a few of them so as to have made them unnoticeable from outside.

"By the gods, Alex. Isn't this the most beautiful sight you've ever seen?"

"It's definitely up there in the top ten." Alex pulled her lover close. "Of course, my favorite is right here in my arms."

"You're impossible," Samantha chided.

"It looks like there's a cave on the other side of the waterfall," Alex observed. "Shall we?"

After drinking from the virgin falls and filling their water bottles, the lovers walked around the pond and started toward the darkened area. Alex again lit the torch in anticipation of darkness and they entered the cavern. There was a feeling of mysticism in the air when they entered the small, slightly damp area.

"I guess these rocks contain limestone," Samantha stated. She pointed to a formation of stalactites above their heads. "You had best be careful, some of these are hanging pretty far down."

Alex glanced up, smiled, and rubbed the top of her head. "Wouldn't want to be poked with one of those."

Illumination of the wall with the torch revealed the presence of water trickling slowly but steadily down the sides of the cave. Exactly in the middle of the small room was an ancient fire pit. There was only the one entrance, and when they turned around to face it, Alex noticed there was a protruding ledge above the door. At the entrance to the cave there was also a large amount



of the substance that the two women were using to keep the torch lit.

"I'll bet they closed this room off with an animal skin of some kind and used it as a sweat hut."

"Damn, this is creepy." Samantha closed the gap between her and Alex and grabbed onto her lover's free hand.

The innocent act of reaching and touching her lover set into motion another vision of the Indian brave Samantha had seen on Thursday. Gasping, she let go of Alex's hand, pulling away.

"What's the matter?" Alex turned quickly to face a befuddled Samantha.

"You know I'm all for a spiritual quest, Alex, but this is really freaking me out. I don't know what to make of the visions I'm getting. I don't remember my mom ever telling me I have Indian blood anywhere in my lineage."

"Maybe someone didn't keep an accurate record, or perhaps it was selective remembrance. Just because you're not related to an Indian in this life doesn't mean you weren't related in a previous life. What did you just see?"

"The same brave I saw the other day, sitting cross-legged across from me in this very room with a fire burning brightly in the pit."

"Samantha, that's great! You wanted to experience reincarnation; you seem to be getting a firsthand trip. If you're afraid now, how do you think you're going to react when we have the sessions?"

"I don't know. I guess it was always, you know, one of those things you think about but never really believe you will ever go through with. Now it's right, like, in my face, and I don't know how to handle it."

"Take a deep breath and let's see if we can make it happen again. Hell, Samantha, you might not even need the specialist. People can do their own past-life readings, you know."

"No, I didn't know. Or if I did, I'd forgotten all about it. Do you really think we should try again?"

"Sure, that's all part of this experience. Hey, wait a minute." The brunette looked around for a place to prop the torch and then she motioned for Samantha to join her. She sat down on a large rock near the fire pit. "It would probably work better if we sat on the floor, but it feels damp, and I don't want to walk around the rest of the day with wet pants."

Samantha giggled, mostly from nerves, and then sat down beside her lover. "Okay, what next?"

"We put ourselves in a meditative mood and ask our higher selves to help us through this journey. We tell our guides that we would like to know about any former life we might have

lived in this area. It seems to work better for both of us if we hold hands." She looked over at Samantha, who had an almost haunting look upon her face.

"You're the one who wanted to do a past-life regression, Samantha. Are you changing your mind? Listen, we can stop now and continue exploring the tunnel if you want to, but honestly, honey, this is the chance of a lifetime. Not many people get to experience this kind of in-you're your-face encounter. It's your call."

Alex sat for a few seconds, waiting for Samantha to make up her mind.

Slowly, two small hands reached across to grasp two larger ones. With a deep sigh, Samantha made physical contact.

Upon closing their eyes, both participants received an immediate depiction of an ancient scene, one that had obviously taken place in a different lifetime, in the precise spot they were now sitting. To Samantha, the Indian brave spoke words that, despite not being understood by the Samantha in the here and now, were clear to her emotional self as words of love. At the exact same time, the present-time Alex was experiencing a similar vision, as the beautiful Indian maiden with eyes as green as emeralds spoke softly to her in words that sounded like poetry to her ears.

The images disappeared and the lovers broke contact. After opening their eyes, they sat for a few minutes, staring at each other in the dimly lit room. It seemed as though the images were getting clearer and the visions longer each time the women experienced them.

Finally Samantha broke the silence. "That was so intense! What did you see, Alex?"

After filling each other in on the experience, the women came to the conclusion that they were definitely looking forward to finding out more about their Indian selves during the forthcoming professional session. They sat for a few more minutes discussing the visions. They finished with their examination of the room they were in, then decided it might be fun to have lunch back by the waterfall.

It had been an extremely interesting and insightful morning. They had stumbled onto more primitive Indian symbols and pictures than either of them had anticipated. Alex had figured they would simply have an enjoyable walk inside the rock and then begin their hike back to the Jeep; it turned out to be much more of an adventure than either woman had expected.

They had been wandering around the inside of the huge red rock mountain for hours, and the sun was directly overhead as they made their way back to the waterfall and found a comfortable spot on which to sit and eat.

"I think when we're finished here, we should go ahead back to the entrance and start back down toward the Jeep-that is, if you want to sleep in that soft bed tonight, Samantha. The time really flew inside the tunnels this morning. I want to get back to the car before the sun goes down."

"I'm right there with you. As much fun as it was, it was tiring. I'd like to try and remember where this place is, though, so we can come back to it again, or tell someone in Park Services about it."

"Do you want to tell them **before** you get a chance to thoroughly check it out, or keep it to yourself for a while?"

"Could we do that? Not tell anyone and just come back again?"

"Honey, this place has been here forever; what's a few more months? You don't sound like you're really ready to leave. Do you want to stay a couple more days and explore?"

"I don't know." The blonde shrugged her shoulders and thought for a moment before speaking again. "Maybe we could look around a little more after lunch and spend one more night on the ledge; after all, you told Gary not to worry until Sunday, right?"

"Exactly. I told him Sunday evening." Alex smiled at the tenderfoot hiker sitting next to her. "Lucky for us we brought enough food to see us through tonight and tomorrow morning."

"See, I told you a few extra packages wouldn't hurt." Samantha gave the taller woman a hug and a kiss before reaching down and running her hand through the cool, clean water. "It's beautiful here, so untouched by civilization."

"This place really is, Samantha. I would venture to say we're the first humans to see this waterfall since the ancient Indians."

"It would surely be a story if the rocks could talk."

"I have a feeling they've been talking to us today." Alex refilled her water bottle while sitting on the edge of the pond.

"I don't think it's the rock as much as the spirits that lived here that are talking to us." Samantha looked into her lover's cerulean eyes and smiled. "Those eyes of yours, Alex, they transcended the centuries. Just proof that beauty never really dies but is born again somewhere else."

Alex gently splashed Samantha. The coolness of the water and impulsiveness of the action caused the small blonde to lose her balance and almost topple into the water. Because Alex's reflexes were as quick as her initiation of the splashing, no one took a swim.

"Alex!"

"I gotcha. Don't worry; I gotcha."

"Yeah, but you were the cause of my almost falling in."

Of course Samantha couldn't remain mad at Alex, especially when she looked into those apologetic baby blues, and they both started laughing.

"Okay, let's get going," Alex suggested.

"Should we take the opposite direction at the fork this time?"

"That would seem the logical route, seeing how the last one led to a dead end. You ready?"

"Sure am."

Samantha filled the backpack while Alex re-lit the torch. Minutes later they were back in the middle of the mountain, standing at the fork in the tunnel.

"Why do I feel like the passage we took the first time was the better way to go?" Samantha asked as they entered the right side of the tunnel.

"Probably because you already know what's there," Alex chuckled, grabbing the smaller woman's hand.

They figured that they were fairly deep into the mountain by now and perhaps this had been used as some sort of ancient spiritual retreat. Again, petroglyphs appeared on the walls of the tunnel. Now they were more detailed, including people, animals, and geometric designs. The women stopped and examined each one they came across.

"You know, I read that the Sinagua didn't leave any petroglyphs in the area, so either these are from a different tribe or we really have come upon a find, Samantha."

"Don't you feel like an archeologist?"

Alex laughed. "Well, not really. I'm not on my hands and knees in the dirt scraping stuff off old skeletons . . ."

"Gods, Alex! What if we find human bones in here?"

The taller woman laughed again. "I guess we'll just have to cross that bridge, if we come to it."

"Any small rooms and you go first," Samantha declared.

"Don't I always?"

"Yeah, I guess you do." Walking closer to her mate than she had been, Samantha decided that touching would take some of her nervousness away.

Again the path curved, and any semblance of light that had been seeping through from locations unknown was totally gone now; the two women saw utter darkness before and behind them, the only light was from their torch. Samantha made sure they had an abundance of moss for fuel. She had no intention of being caught in the cave without light.

"It looks like it's widening again, Samantha, and turning. Which direction do you want to take?"

"We're still marking at each new direction, right?"

"Right!"

"I hope we won't get in trouble for marking up a sacred relic."

"Samantha, who are we going to get in trouble with? No one knows this place exists. Now, which way do you want to go?"

"I don't know; this way looks interesting." The blonde pointed to the right and started walking in that direction. She wasn't more than a step or two in front of Alex when there was a thunderous crackling sound, and the ground beneath her feet began to collapse.

**"A-l-e-x!"** Samantha screamed. The look on her face was one of total terror.

Without a moment's delay, Alex reached out to Samantha to prevent her from falling. She grabbed at her shirt and pulled her close. A deafening rumble shook the rock's foundation, and the two women were sent plunging through the floor of the tunnel.

The two women experienced a time warp mixture of falling forever and landing immediately, hitting with an audible thud a new level of red dirt.

During the fall, Alex had maneuvered their bodies so that she would be the first to hit the ground, with Samantha landing on top of her. She managed to reach the clay floor first but as she did, she felt a popping sensation in her left ankle. Her knees buckled under her and any attempt to land on both feet became impossible. Even though her balance was askew, Alex never let go of her precious cargo. She put her left arm out to break the fall, but in the process hyperextended her wrist and then landed on it with her full weight and some of her partner's. She rolled onto her back to prevent Samantha from hitting the hard floor.

Desperately trying to mask the pain and still trying to keep the smaller woman out of harm's way, Alex hit her head on a protruding rock.

"Ooff, fuck! God damn son-of-a-bitch! Ouch!" Tears streamed down Alex's face and she finally loosened her hold on her lover to grab the offended area. "Shit . . . damn . . . ow . . . hey . . . you okay, Samantha?"

It took a second or two for the blonde to catch her breath and answer. "I'm only a little shook up and probably only slightly bruised--thanks to you." Reaching in the direction of her hero, she could tell from Alex's words and body posture that the same did not apply to her. "Gods, Alex, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just . . . fuck!" When the brunette tried to push herself up, she realized that her left hand

was not going to cooperate with even the simplest of maneuvers. Pain radiated from her wrist, and she could feel it already beginning to swell. "I think I sprained my wrist, damn it! Did the torch fall with us?" With her right hand she reached inside her pants pockets to retrieve the small flashlight so they could search for anything that had made it down to this new level with them. "I think that's it over there, Samantha. Can you get to it?"

"Sure thing, Alex." The blonde stood, a bit wobbly at first and with a slight limp. Her knee had hit the ground upon landing, but other than that, she had been well protected by her lover's body. She picked up the torch, then pulled out some of the moss she had in her pocket. After she carefully wrapped it around the club she asked Alex for the matches. She fired up the torch and made a niche in the floor to hold it so that she could tend to Alex, who was sitting with her right knee bent up to her chest, her right elbow on her knee and her hand cradling her forehead.

"Here, honey, let me see your head." Tender, tear-filled eyes searched the ebony locks for any sign of blood and remarkably found only a large bump, but no broken skin. Gently she turned the face of her lover to meet her own. "Again, you're my champion, Alex." The blonde bent down and kissed the damp face in front of her. "Where do you hurt?"

With a confused look on her face, the brunette tried to formulate an answer. "Damn. Can't seem to pinpoint it. I think I might have a concussion." She looked up at Samantha and gave the blonde a weak smile. "I know more is better, but I don't think seeing double of you is what I need right now."

"Shit! We gotta get out of here, Alex! Can you stand?" The blonde reached for her lover's hand, only to have it pulled back as Alex winced in pain.

"Not a good idea, Samantha, hurts too much. Let's try this." Alex reached out her right arm. "Help me up, will you?"

With Samantha's help they slowly and methodically got Alex unsteadily to her feet, but when she tried to take a step she found herself again ungracefully falling.

"Maybe I should sit here for a few minutes and try to compose myself." Tears were now streaming freely, leaving red drip marks as they passed through the dust that had settled on her face.

Unsure whether to comfort or find a means of escape, Samantha picked up the torch and walked about the small oblong room. There was one unexplored passage leading out from the area, and the only other means of escape was to climb up the wall to the level from which they had fallen.

A glimmer of hope appeared in her eyes, "Hey, Alex, is the phone working?"

The brunette seemed to stare right through Samantha, as though she didn't understand the question. Samantha started to ask again but instead decided to reach into Alex's pocket and retrieve their only means of communication with the outside world. "Damn," the blonde complained as she tapped the phone with the palm of her hand. "I can't even get the lights to

come on. I think it got broken in the fall."

Alex shook her head to get the cobwebs out. "Um . . . yeah, it could have, but it could be that we're in the middle of a red rock mountain. It might work better out in the open."

"Right. Then we need to figure out how we're going to get out of here."

"Samantha, honey, Alex," stuttered, "I don't think you can get me out of here by yourself. But there's a phone in the Jeep."

The blonde stared at her lover for a second before the consequences of the statement registered. "You want me to leave you here and go back to the car alone?"

"This has nothing to do with want, Samantha. We don't have a choice here." Alex's voice trembled slightly as she realized that she would be more hindrance than help to Samantha in getting back to the vehicle. "Listen, honey, you've a better chance of getting to the car and back while there's still some light in the sky, if I stay here and wait for you."

"I don't want to leave you here alone! And . . . um . . . what if I can't find my way to the car? What if I can't find my way back here?"

The dark-haired beauty could hear the terror in her lover's voice and knew she had to convince her that everything would be okay, even though she wasn't all that sure herself. What she was sure of was that the room was spinning and she was seeing double Samantha. Because of that and her inability to stand for any length of time, their only choice was for Samantha to go alone. She knew it would be impossible for her to scale the wall, with the entire left side of her body out of commission.

"Samantha," Alex's voice was calm and soothing. "We need a plan of action, and I'm afraid the best chance is for you to go alone and come back with help."

"No! Let me look around again!" The small blonde was on the verge of panic but trying desperately not to show it. She was sure if she looked hard enough a miracle would occur and they would be able to walk out of the cave together. But in searching the room with the torch, her heart fell when she realized that both of them getting out right now was not going to happen.

The room was elliptical and approximately eight by ten feet. As she had already noticed, there was an exit that was about four feet in height. She walked over to the arch and poked the torch through; it was definitely a tunnel.

"I could explore this avenue of escape, Alex," Samantha suggested as she looked into the opening.

"Honey, I don't think taking an unknown path would be the best decision right now. It might be a false exit, and then you'll have wasted precious time."

"I think you might be right. So, after I climb the wall, and make myself a new torch, I can follow the marks we left getting to this point in the cave; they should lead me back to the ledge."

"Right, and from there you can make it to the parking lot. I'll give you my compass and the flashlight in case you run out of matches and the torch goes out."

"No!" Samantha objected, again. "I'm not going to leave you alone **and** in the dark."

"Samantha, I'll have that torch," She pointed to the flame in her lover's hand. "I'll keep some of the matches in case it goes out; will that make you feel better?"

"Not much." Tears streamed down the blonde's face at the thought of leaving Alex alone and hurt in the middle of a mountain.

"Come here, Samantha."

When the smaller figure sat down on the ground next to her, Alex placed aching arms around drooping shoulders.

"Damn, Alex. I'm scared."

"I know, sweetheart, but everything's going to be okay. I have faith in you, Samantha."

"I'm glad one of us does," the blonde tried to joke. "Seriously, Alex, how are you feeling?"

"Well . . . I'm not going to lie to you." She took a deep breath and exhaled. "I'd love to be able to climb up that wall with you, but with both my left wrist and my left ankle either badly sprained or broken, I don't think that's an option. Like I said, I might also have a concussion; my vision's blurred and doubled." Alex heard Samantha gasp. "On the other hand, it could just be that I'm a little dizzy from the fall and from hitting my head." *Right! Just don't tell her that sometimes you have total clarity of thought and other times can't think worth shit!*

"Alex, you can't fall asleep if I leave you here. Promise me you won't fall asleep."

The brunette held her lover closer and tried to reassure her with a statement that she herself had absolutely no faith in. "I won't fall asleep, Samantha. I'll stay awake and listen for your return." She smiled at her mate, trying to elicit the same from her, but Samantha merely shook her head in quiet desperation, stood up, and took inventory of the amount of water left in the bottles. Then she checked the matches and the food they had put into the small backpack.

"I'm going to fill your bottle with water from mine."

Alex started to protest and Samantha stopped her immediately.

"Listen, if I'm going to have to leave you here, we're going to do some of it my way." Her voice had taken on a completely different tenor, and Alex felt that she was putting forth a really strong



front. "So I'm leaving you all the food. I can restock when I reach the ledge, and I can get more water when I cross the creek. I will take the compass because I'm going to need that to find the car."

"I'll keep the torch down here and you can take the flashlight."

"Yes, you already said that Alex."

"I did? Oh, okay."

"But when I find a club to make a new torch, I'm going to throw the flashlight back down to you."

"Did I say that, too?" Alex questioned.

"No--don't you remember . . ."

"Sure I do," Alex lied. She knew she was having trouble concentrating completely on what was happening, but she certainly didn't want Samantha know.

"Good. Anyhow, I have faith that you can catch it with your good hand." Samantha smiled at her lover.

"Catch?"

"The flashlight."

"Right."

"Alex . . ."

The brunette was still sharp enough intermittently to change the subject when it seemed like she was going off the deep end. "Hey, I guess all the practice on the wall at home is really going to come in handy now." She looked at the wall in front of her. "It doesn't look that difficult, really. Luckily this red rock has a lot of niches and grooves."

"Yeah, I was checking it out a minute ago. I just wish I could get you up it. Listen, what if I get the rope from the backpack and pull you up?"

"Honey, I have a feeling that would be a waste of precious time. And now you really need to get going." Alex was worried about how much longer she could keep a focused conversation going. And she was already fighting sleep. She needed Samantha to be on her way.

"I know, but I don't want to leave you here."

"You have no choice."

Samantha got on her knees and threw her arms around Alex. She couldn't stop the new onslaught of tears. "I love you more than life, Alex. I wish I were the one who had to stay here, instead of you. I'll be back as soon as I possibly can."

"I know that, sweetheart. Be careful, and I'll see you in a few hours. Here, give me the torch. I'll hold it out so you can see to get up the wall."

Alex did her best to smile and managed to keep her tears at bay as she watched Samantha begin her climb up the wall to the tunnel above them. It would take more than courage to get them out of this mess.

Indeed the practice climbing at home was paying off; Samantha didn't find getting up the wall all that difficult. Occasionally, she slipped on a tiny notch, or her fingers would lose traction on an irregular hold, but she soon found herself looking down into the pit with her lover sitting looking up at her. It broke her heart to see Alex hurt, but now was not the time for pity. She took out the flashlight and scanned the area, easily finding a club that could be used for a torch. When the moss from her pocket was wrapped around the top and the newly lit flame was burning brightly, she yelled down to Alex.

"I'm going to throw the flashlight down; will you be able to catch it?"

"If you're any good at aiming, I'll be able to." Alex tried to sound jovial.

Samantha gently tossed the lit object in the direction of Alex's outstretched hand and smiled when she saw it make contact. *Good girl.* "Great catch, honey," she called into the pit. "I'll be back with help as soon as possible."

"Be careful, Samantha," Alex yelled.

"I will. I love you, Alex."

"Love you, too."

Before she could rethink the situation and talk herself into climbing back down, the blonde turned and started toward the outside opening and the ledge. She was grateful they had marked their way, and it wasn't long before she caught a glimpse of sunlight shining through the dark tunnel.

Once out on the ledge, Samantha tried to use the cell phone. Her worst fear was confirmed, and she resigned herself to the fact that it had definitely been damaged in the fall. She cursed the technology that had forsaken her in a time of dire need, and in a fit of anger, she threw the phone to the ground and stepped on it. "If you're gonna be broken, damn it, the least you can do is look broken." *Well, that was an adult reaction to the situation, Samantha. Yeah, I know, but it made me feel better.*

After she kicked the smashed receiver out of her way, she picked up her backpack and emptied it of everything nonessential. Now was not a good time to be weighted down with frivolous items. She looked around to get her bearings, and then headed toward the parking lot.

The edge of the precipice was a lot steeper than the climbing wall at home, but when she began her descent, she easily found footholds, and in a shorter amount of time than she would have anticipated, she reached the bottom of the cliff.

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Alex had watched as Samantha efficiently made her way up the wall. The brunette had sat in silence and utter agony on the cool, damp ground. But the pride of watching the small blonde ascend the rough, red rock wall had seemed to diminish the pain slightly. *I'm glad we decided climbing the wall at home would be good exercise for you*, she had whispered to herself.

When Samantha reached the top and called back down to her, Alex's heart had ached at the thought of the smaller woman having to find her way back to the Jeep alone; then it had taken all of her concentration to focus on the flashlight Samantha threw down to her. Even though Alex had seen two lights spinning quickly downward, she knew only one of them to be real. Luckily, the small object practically fell into her unharmed hand. *Kudos to you Samantha--she had silently acclaimed--good aim.*

Alex had continued to watch the flickering of the light in the tunnel above until darkness overtook the area. Soon the only light was that from the torch slowly burning in its groove on the floor next to her. She knew it would be a long wait. She also knew there was no way in hell she was going to be able to keep herself awake until Samantha came back with help.

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Looking up at the side of the mountain she had just climbed down, Samantha tried to remember everything Alex had told her on the way. She stood silent for a few minutes and in her mind's eye replayed the scenes from the previous day.

After she got her bearings, she began to make her way around the mountain. She remembered that she had to follow the structure for a while and then turn south. Words from their conversation the day before, when Alex had tried to instill in her where they were headed and where they had come from, rang through her memory.

*"Let me tell you now so I don't forget later,"* Alex had said as she pointed to this very tower. *"See that turret up there, Samantha?"*

The blonde had followed with her eyes as Alex pointed, then she had nodded her head and answered yes.

*"Okay,"* Alex had continued. *"The Jeep is parked directly south of that spire, so if anything . . ."*

And then Samantha had made a statement she never should have made; perhaps her arrogance was the cause of this situation they now found themselves in. She almost hadn't paid attention but was extremely glad that she had, even if she had answered, *"It's enough to know that it's there, Alex. I'm sure I won't ever have to use that information."*

The blonde was making her way around the huge rock structure when the sky began to darken and she felt raindrops lightly touching the top of her head. *These surely are the tears of the gods today. They're crying for the predicaments we humans constantly find ourselves in.*

Not wanting to waste precious time dodging the precipitation, she was about to venture out into the downpour when she heard a small voice, almost a whisper, beckoning her.

*"Over here."* The voice was clear and crisp.

Samantha couldn't believe her ears. Her heart began to race. *Thank you, Goddess, I'm not alone; there are other people here! Now someone can stay with Alex while I hike back to the car, and maybe they have a cell phone with them that actually works.* She was beside herself with excitement, but as she looked around in the direction from which the voice had come, she saw no one.

"Hello," she yelled. "My name's Samantha; what's yours?"

The response to her plea was the increased intensity of the rain. She tried to make contact once again, and when no one answered, her shoulders slumped and she assumed her imagination had jumped into overdrive, causing her to hear a phantom voice.

She chastised herself for acting so vulnerable and shook off the feeling of dread. After taking a deep breath, she once again started to venture forth from the sheltered outcropping of red rock. Loud and clear the voice reverberated in her ears.

*"Over here, you can help her out."*

*Okay, I think maybe I'm going a little light in the head. Maybe I did hit something in that fall. I want help so badly--I keep imagining it. I've got to stop being afraid that I won't get back to Alex in time and something horrible will happen to her. I've got to think positive thoughts!*

*"Samantha!"* the voice insisted.

It sounded like it came from somewhere to the left of her, but when she looked in that direction, she saw nothing out of the ordinary. All she could see through the rain was rocks and trees. Looking ahead, she saw more trees and more rain. Then, for some reason she turned to the left again and, out of the corner of her eye, caught a glimpse of something moving in the underbrush near the base of the mountain.

Quickly, she ran in the direction of the movement but found nothing.

"I know you're here. Please, I have a friend who's in dire need of assistance. Please, show yourself."

The wait was heart-wrenching. Then she heard movement. She was closer to whoever it was; she just knew she was. "Please," she pleaded. "Show yourself. I really could use your help."

It was after she had spoken the last word that she heard the voice again.

*"Follow me; you can get her out."*

This time when she looked in the direction of the voice, her heart did a flip-flop. Standing before her was an Indian maiden who couldn't have been more than 18 years old. She was fair-skinned for an Indian; that and her light-colored hair seemed an odd contrast to the buckskin clothing she wore. Samantha got the strangest feeling when she looked into the maiden's eyes. It was as if she was looking into her own soul. It not the same feeling as when she looked into the eyes of her soulmate--no, looking into the eyes of this young woman was more like looking at an ancient duplication of herself.

*"I am you,"* the maiden smiled. *"You are me. Time has no beginning and no end and we have just slipped between the lines."*

Samantha stood for a few seconds dumbfounded. "I don't know what to say. I feel like a fool." *Okay, Samantha you're really slipping into LaLa Land. Imagination is definitely working overtime.*

*"You're not imagining me,"* the Indian assured Samantha. *"Come. We need to work quickly while there is plenty of light. I know an entrance to the rock that will lead you to the one who is hurt. You can bring her out of the cave."*

Without another second's hesitation, Samantha followed her heart as she followed a vision of someone she used to be.

When rounding the rock, the maiden stopped and pointed to the ground. *"Down there, dig. There are roots that will help her pain."*

Samantha knelt down and dug. She came upon a misshapen root. It was a soft brown in color and had a musky odor. She pulled it out of the ground, brushed it off, and held it up to get a look at it before putting it into her backpack.

*"We are healers. It will ease her pain."*

A little further around the side of the mountain, the maiden stopped once more. *"Here."* She pointed to a small succulent. *"These leaves put on the skin will have a numbing effect."*

Again Samantha took the word of the Indian and plucked a couple of handfuls of the leaves, stuffing them into her backpack along with the root.

"Are you sure I can get in and get her out?" Samantha was slightly worried about losing daylight.

*"I will not lead you astray. I will help you get your heart out of harm's way. I know the bond; I will not betray you."*

The Indian motioned to an area on the wall of the rock; Samantha could see where the wall darkened in a shadow, mostly covered by thickly growing vines. The blonde took out the camping knife she had stuck into her shorts and began cutting away at the overgrowth, and when she had finished, she stared at a small opening that led back into the rock.

She looked at the young woman standing beside her and shrugged her shoulders questioningly.

*"She is in a ritual room; the tunnel leading into it is not very long. It is just long enough and winding enough not to be able to see the light through the far side. Go into the cave here and follow the tunnel. There is only one way in and one way out; you'll not get lost. Feed her the root and cover her with the elixir of the leaves; she will be fine."*

"I want to trust you. I want to believe. I'm just afraid you're a figment of my imagination, that I bumped my head when we fell and I'm putting Alex in danger by taking the time to do this."

The Indian vehemently shook her head, pointing to herself and then back at Samantha. *"You were once a great Shamaness, Samantha. I am the essence that you left behind, in case you ever came back to this place. Go now; heal her. She needs you."*

There was a sharp crackle of lightening, followed by a clap of thunder. Samantha stood in front of the cave opening and watched as the Indian maiden with emerald eyes that matched her own walked out into the midday showers and pointed to a rainbow that was already beginning to form in the sky to the south of them.

*"It's the sign that all will be right and in its proper place. I'm glad I was here to help."*

When the last of her words were spoken, the maiden looked at the modern version of herself and smiled. *"A part of me will always be with you, Samantha."* The Indian disappeared as quickly as she had materialized.

Samantha still had a large piece of the dried moss she had retrieved from the tunnel walls in her pocket. Her backpack was almost full with the root, the succulent, and the piece of dried plant that smelled like sage, all the items the maiden had pointed out for her to dig or pick up. She turned toward the opening in the mountain and looked for a green branch to use as a torch. While searching the ground, her eyes fell upon a small red stone in the shape of a heart. The palm of her hand began to tingle when she picked it up and it made her feel immediately energized. She placed it in her pocket, picked up a branch, and assembled a new torch.

*"The energy is inside you, Samantha; work with it-- it will be there for you."*

The voice had again flowed gently on the wind and whispered into her ear. She somehow knew everything was going to be okay. An involuntary smile lit up her face as she ducked her head and entered the cave.

Continued in Part 13.

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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# ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## Part 13

### Chapter 13

Alex could hear the rain when it began to fall. She tried desperately to keep her eyes open and stay alert to what was happening around her, but the sound of her own voice was no longer working as a deterrent to falling asleep. She found herself rambling and making stupid sounds to stay awake. The soft drip of water falling and trickling down the walls of the cave had become mesmerizing. Even though she had propped her foot up on a large rock to keep the swelling

down, the throbbing in her ankle and her wrist was constant.

Finally, she could no longer fight the need for sleep and allowed herself to drift into a semi-conscious state. Her body quickly relaxed into the realm of dreams, bringing with it the blessed absence of pain.

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*"Over here, Nairod."*

The sound of a lyrical voice prompted Alex to open her eyes, and she found the room now bathed in an eerie red light with a rock fire glowing brightly. The young maiden she had seen earlier in the day was pouring water on the rocks, causing steam to rise and warm the room. Alex could smell the scent of a mixture of pine, sage, and eucalyptus. The odor seemed to permeate her aching body and brought with it welcomed relief.

She watched in disbelief as the Indian brave she and Samantha had seen earlier joined the young maiden.

*"Father's wrath will come down on us if they find us here alone,"* the young brave whispered, entering the cave through the opening Samantha had found earlier.

*"Everyone else is at the celebration; we won't be missed until the moon is high above the horizon."*

The Indian crossed to the center of the room, totally ignoring Alex as she lay there watching. He almost walked through her on his way to take the maiden into his arms.

When he did so, Alex had the distinct feeling of holding Samantha. The empathy was unsettling and comforting at the same time. As the lovers embraced, their entire story played through the mind of the wounded woman like a vision quest.

Alex immediately felt a cosmic connection to the individuals who were as real to her as if they were standing there in the flesh, even though she knew in the recesses of her mind that that was impossible.

The heritage of the brave was made distinctly clear, and she felt a stronger connection to him than to the maiden. She somehow got his history in the form of a story: a white man had raped his grandmother and left her for dead not far from the Indian village. When the braves of the village found her, they took her home and the shaman nursed her back to health. A beautiful girl child with eyes the color of the summer sky was born to the maiden, and as she grew into a lovely young woman, she caught the eye of the chief's son, who was only a few years her senior. They eventually married, and the handsome brave with shocking blue eyes, hair as black as night, and skin the color of polished bronze--the young brave known as Nairod--was born to them.



Alex also received the background of the young maiden with eyes the color of spring grass, hair the color of summer wheat, and skin the color of a newborn fawn. Again, in story form, she learned that a baby girl had been born to a white woman who had lived with a renegade brave. The couple had settled on the outskirts of the Indian village, between Indian territory and a white man's settlement. During a skirmish between his tribe and the settlers, the brave had been killed and the woman had been wounded. The Indians attempted to nurse her back to health, but she was heavy with child, in fragile condition, and she ended up losing her life in childbirth. Knowing that the child was an innocent, the village Shaman, who had lost both his wife and child in childbirth, offered to take the baby in and raise her as his own. The girl eventually became a very powerful influence in the village, and when the Shaman passed on, she took over as head Shamaness. Her daughter, the young woman now standing before Alex, had followed in her footsteps.

Alex continued to watch the interactions of the two people. It was important that she stay awake, but she seemed to be losing the battle again. Just as she was about to give in to the desire for rest and close her eyes, the room darkened slightly, the figures faded, and she saw a flickering light in the direction of the exit.

The next sound she heard was the most beautiful voice in the world.

"Alex! Alex, are you awake?" Samantha's question was more of a plea. She knew it was dangerous for the wounded woman to sleep, but she also knew that more than likely she had probably done so. The maiden had been right in saying that the tunnel was short; she could see the flickering of light not too far ahead of her. "I'm coming, Alex!"

Suddenly finding herself quite awake, Alex knew that Samantha hadn't been gone long enough to get all the way to the Jeep and come back with help. Her mind was reeling as to why Samantha would put them both in jeopardy by coming back for her so soon. She also wondered how Samantha had managed to get into the room from the outer entrance. She shook all the questions from her head and cursed to herself for moving so quickly. It really didn't matter; she was sure Samantha had a good reason.

Alex's voice cracked when she tried to answer Samantha's question. "I'm awake, Samantha," she muttered, keeping her eyes on the light that continued to get brighter. Her heart leapt when Samantha came into view.

The blonde hurried toward her and threw her arms around Alex's neck. "I wish we had taken the exit out of here earlier," she confided to her lover. "I could have had you halfway to the Jeep by now."

"Samantha, how did you know . . ."

"It's a long story, Alex, and one that's not totally believable."

*Just try me, my love; wait 'til I tell you mine!*

"Wow, I didn't know a single torch could heat an area as large as this," Samantha stated. "This room has got to be 10 degrees warmer than what it was when I left here."

"You wouldn't believe me if I tried to explain to you how the room got heated," Alex replied. She wanted to tell Samantha all about the vision, but it would have to wait. "Why did you come back through the cave? How did you know wherever you entered from would lead back here to this room? Samantha, I know you couldn't have gotten to the parking lot and back already. Did the phone work? Did you call for help? How-"

Samantha put a finger to her lover's mouth and quietly hushed her. "No, my love, the phone didn't work, and you're right, I didn't get to the car. I'll tell you how I found the entrance **after** I take care of some of your pain."

The blonde reached into her backpack and pulled out the brown root. Peeling away the outer layer with her knife, she cut off a piece of the white fleshy center and placed it in Alex's mouth. "This might taste a little bitter to begin with, but it will alleviate the pain and make it tolerable."

"How do you-" Alex started to question.

"Trust me, my love, I just do."

Cloudy blue eyes stared into clear green and Alex somehow knew that Samantha did, indeed, know what she was talking about.

While Alex was busy chewing on the plant that had the consistency of a raw potato, Samantha pulled out some of the leaves she had in her pack and began snapping them to allow the sticky liquid to form on the edges. Gently, she smeared the greenish goo around the swollen ankle and wrist.

"What?" Alex managed to ask and Samantha felt compelled to explain.

"This will help numb the skin so you won't hurt so much when we start out of here." She put her head down, afraid to look Alex in the eyes for fear her mate might think her insane. "Alex, I was starting toward the car when I saw the Indian maiden again." She stopped and waited for a response. Receiving none, she continued. "She actually talked to me this time and helped me find not only the cave entrance, but the medicinal herbs to help ease your pain so we can get out of here together. I know it sounds absolutely crazy but-"

"No! No, Samantha it doesn't sound crazy . . . I mean, it does . . . but it doesn't. I had a similar experience, but they didn't talk to me."

"They?"

"Both the Indian brave and the maiden were in here with me while I was trying to fight drifting off to sleep. I saw them as surely as I'm looking at you right this minute, unless you're an apparition as well."

"I'm not an apparition, honey. I'm here in the flesh." She gently touched the warm face of the woman she loved. "We're going to get out of here, Alex. Everything will be all right, I promise."

"Now who's the hero?" Alex asked with a weak smile.

"I'm no hero, but I'll do my damndest to act like one until I get you safely home."

The smoke from the torch filled the room with the scent of fresh sage, and Samantha told Alex to inhale deeply. Looking around the room, she found a few small branches that could be used to help stabilize the injured woman's ankle and wrist. Tearing strips of material from her blouse, she placed one branch on either side of Alex's ankle and wrapped it tightly to keep it in one position. If it worked the way she expected, Alex would be able to stand and walk with partial weight bearing. Some of this Samantha had learned from transcribing, some from watching Alex work at the clinic, and some seemed to be coming naturally to her without even thinking about it.

"How are you feeling, Alex? Any better?"

"As a matter of fact, the pain has diminished greatly, both coming from the inside and out. I actually think I might be able to walk."

"Let's not get carried away. I was hoping the medicine would be strong, but I don't know that I want you thinking everything is perfect. For all we know, you may be in shock and . . ."

*"Samantha, believe in your ability to help heal her."*

Samantha snapped her head around to see if the maiden was visible. She was nowhere in sight.

"What is it, Samantha?"

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Alex cocked her head to listen.

"Nothing; it's gone now--must have been the wind." Samantha turned back to the situation at hand. "How does your head feel?"

"It's still pounding a little, but nothing like it was before you came back in. I don't feel as sleepy, either."

*"Give her some energy."*

"Huh?"

"I didn't say anything. Samantha, are you okay?"

"Alex, I'm going to do something that might seem totally nuts to you, but I think it might help."

"Hey, I'm a captive audience." She winked at Samantha and then added in a more serious tone, "Do whatever you think might help. I'm a willing participant."

Samantha reached into her pocket and brought out the heart-shaped stone; she rubbed it vigorously between her hands. When she could feel the heat emanating from the stone and her skin, she placed the stone in Alex's lap and put one hand on either side of her lover's head.

"I can feel the heat radiating from your hands," Alex told her lover in a surprised tone.

"I was hoping you could. I'm going to concentrate on clearing your head and your vision. Getting through the tunnel will take a lot of energy, and I don't want to put more stress on your body than absolutely necessary."

While she was quietly standing above her heart's desire, with her fingers on Alex's temples, the blonde suddenly felt the unmistakable feeling of added pressure on her hands, accompanied by a whispered voice inside her head. *"A little extra energy never hurt anyone. This is my final gift to you and Alex. Everything will be fine, Samantha. Once you clear the cave, Nairod will show you a shortcut back to where you need to go. May the gods watch over you. I'm glad I got to meet who I was to become; the circle of time is endless."*

As suddenly as it had appeared, the extra pressure on her hands was gone. She bent down and kissed Alex on the crown of her head. "Any better, my love?"

"Much!" Alex replied, surprised. "You really have a healing touch, Samantha. I think you need to change professions."

"Alex, you do realize that the Indians are our former selves, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, she told me I . . . um . . . she . . . or . . . you know what I mean! I was a Shamaness when I was her."

"That makes sense; so you've brought into this life some of the attributes of that one. Mom says that's what we're supposed to do. She's going to love what went on here."

"I don't think she's going to be so happy about the accident."

"No, not that, but the fact that we got to have a regression without having to go through a middle person."

"I don't mean to change the subject, but time is slipping away from us here. Do you think maybe you can make it through the cave, Alex?"

"I'm ready to try."

"We'll find you a crutch once we get outside. The walls of the corridor are close enough together for support, and I'll walk in front of you for extra assistance."

Surprisingly, when Alex stood in an upright position, she found that her light-headedness was gone, and so was most of her pain. She knew better than to push her luck, however, and continued to keep as much weight as possible off the injured ankle.

Progression through the tunnel was slow but steady, and they soon found themselves out in the open. The rain had ceased, and the air smelled fresh and clean. Samantha extinguished the remaining torch, and then she looked around for a sturdy branch that Alex could use as a staff. There was a felled tree not far from the entrance.

"Alex, I think I see a walking stick for you," Samantha exclaimed. "If you put most of your weight on that when I bring it back, and the rest on my shoulder, we should be able to make it to the car in a couple of hours. We'll stop **anytime** you feel the strain becoming too much or the pain returning. Okay?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," Alex answered in an almost convincing voice. *She certainly can take charge in needed situations; she's tougher than I gave her credit for.*

Sympathetic green eyes searched the depths of baby blue pools for any sign that the pain was returning and found none.

They had zigged and zagged all the way from the parking lot to the bottom of the ledge on their hike the day before, and Samantha was hoping that they could find a path that would lead them directly to the car instead of traveling back the same way. It was no longer a pleasant excursion, and the sooner they got to the car, the quicker she could call for help or drive Alex to a hospital.

After stepping away from the cave's entrance, Samantha started to leave Alex's side to get the staff. Simultaneously, the women felt a tingling sensation, and the hair on their arms raised up. Directly ahead of them stood the semi-transparent image of the Indian brave they had come to know as Nairod. He was beckoning to them to follow where he was pointing.

An almost melancholy feeling washed over the blonde as she realized that this mystical experience was about to come to an end. She only wished it had occurred under less stressful and detrimental circumstances. Mentally, she said her farewell to her former self.

"Looks like he's pointing in the direction of the creek," Alex informed her lover.

"Well, you know we never did actually follow the creek; we stopped and played in it but then crossed it."

Samantha hurried to retrieve the stick and handed it to Alex. "Here this should make a strong crutch, and you can lean on me."

"I don't want to go putting all my weight-"

"Don't be ridiculous, Alex! If you don't lean on me, neither one of us is going to get anywhere." Samantha gave Alex a determined look and put her arm around the taller woman's waist. "Come on, the sooner we start following the Indian's lead, the faster we'll arrive at the car."

Alex found that the pain in both her ankle and wrist were still quite diminished. The root she had ingested and the gel Samantha had put on her skin had obviously had enough time to secrete their medicinal properties. She leaned hard on the makeshift crutch and as softly as possible on Samantha as they carefully made their way toward the creek.

Samantha could tell that Alex was feeling better as they inched their way forward. The taller woman seemed to be picking up the pace, and as long as the blonde could not feel Alex's muscles tightening or see any grimacing on the injured woman's face, she allowed Alex to control the speed at which they traveled.

Minutes later they were standing beside the creek; the water level here was low and in some areas nonexistent. The bed was layered with a sandy loam, which turned out to be much softer to walk on than the rocks they had just left.

Once again the brave appeared, and Samantha watched Alex tilt her head as if she were listening to a voice meant for her ears only.

Alex placed her arm around Samantha's shoulders so as not to put pressure on her injured wrist. "He said to follow the creek and that it would take us where we need to be." With an almost sorrowful look she continued, "I think that will be the last time we see him, Samantha."

"Yeah, I think they know we can make it the rest of the way on our own."

The women continued on and stopped only for an occasional drink or to add more of the pain-relieving gel to Alex's wrist and ankle. Within less time than either of them had imagined, the welcomed sight of the parking lot greeted them.

"Sit down, Alex. I'll go get the car."

"I can make it the rest of the way; I've made it this far," came the reply.

"No, you sit; I'll go!"

"We're not even off the path yet, Samantha," Alex countered.

"That's the beauty of having a Jeep. Isn't that what you told me the other day?"

Alex nodded and smiled at her Destiny. *She seems to enjoy being in control of the situation.*

"So you stay right here! I'm going to run ahead and drive back here." The inflexible look in the verdant eyes left no doubt as to the blonde's intentions. Gently she helped Alex to a sitting position on a large rock. Once the brunette was seated, Samantha ran toward the parking lot and salvation.

"Not so fast, Samantha. We've already arrived--no rush now," Alex called after her to absolutely no avail. The blonde was racing toward the vehicle at as much of a full clip as she could muster. She was limping slightly but was determined not to let that slow her down.

Tears of happiness flowed down the small woman's face as she opened the door and jumped into the driver's seat. *Thank the gods we're back and safe.* It was hard to believe that civilization was finally within their grasp. Alex would be fine now, and all the worrying was for naught. *Get a grip, girl! You can't be crying like a baby when you get back to her.*

Wiping her face, she choked back the tears and replaced them with a smile. Earlier, when she first left Alex sitting alone in the cave, her body had been racked with the fear that she wouldn't be able to get help in time, or that if she got help, she wouldn't be able to find Alex again. She knew it was silly, and in the light of all that had transpired, it was down right ridiculous, but the relief of sitting behind the wheel of the Jeep with Alex just yards away was monumental.

The transition from blacktop to dirt was an easy one for the 4-wheel drive vehicle, and Samantha had no difficulty driving to the spot where she had left her lover.

Alex heard the Jeep before she actually saw it approaching, and before it came to a complete stop, the dark-haired beauty attempted to get up from the rock.

"Wait!" Samantha shouted at her from inside the car. "I'll come help you. No sense compounding the injuries." In a puff of dust the vehicle halted and Samantha hopped out. "You might be a good physical therapist, but you're a lousy patient," she scolded as she approached the injured woman.

"That's the way it's supposed to be," Alex retorted. "I'm the one that should be doing the treating, not the one being treated."

"Well, this time it's the other way around, so you had best take advantage of the pampering while you can." The small blonde grabbed the larger woman around the waist and offered her shoulder to lean on as they began to walk toward the car.

"Do you want me to call the hospital and tell them we're coming?" Samantha asked as she helped the tall woman slide onto the front seat.

Alex laughed, which received an acrid look from the woman helping her.

"What's so funny? We're on our way to the hospital, right?"

"Wrong," came the unexpected reply.

"What do you mean, wrong? Alex, you have to have those injuries looked at-"

"I know, Samantha. But we don't have to go to the hospital. We'll go back to Gary's. He has all the equipment we need to see what the damages are."

"Do you want me to call and tell them we're coming?"

"No, honey," Alex replied. "No sense in getting everyone all riled up and waiting for us. We'll be fine until we get to the Center."

Samantha was settled in behind the wheel, and Alex reached over and touched her hand.

"Whatever it was you did at the cave, Samantha, my head still doesn't hurt. If I believed in miracles, I would say we witnessed more than one today."

"If you would say that, Alex, don't you think you ought to drop the 'if I believed' part?"

"I suppose I should." Taking the small hand in her own, Alex brought it to her lips.

After driving for a few minutes in silence, Samantha verbalized a question that had been running around in her mind during their trek back to the car.

"How are we going to retrieve the stuff we left on the ledge, Alex? I pushed it all inside the cave entrance before I climbed down so it wouldn't get ruined."

"I guess we have three options, Samantha. We can leave it out there for any lucky campers who happen to come across it, we can try to explain to someone where it's located and let them have it when they find it, or we can let it stay until the next time we come back. Now that we know the shortcut to the cave, it won't take us long to get there. Do you really want to let someone else know about our little secret?"

"When you put it like that, no. I would rather no one else found the place unless it was by accident. It's kind of special, even if it does have a slightly bad memory attached to it." Samantha looked over at Alex's wrist and then down at her ankle.

"Think of it this way, Samantha. If we hadn't fallen through the floor, the extended experience with our former selves might never have happened."

"You're right, but I hate that you had to go through so much pain to realize that what your mom has been telling you your entire life is the truth." Samantha chuckled, and Alex could not help but smile at the reasoning.

Since they were nearly back at Gary's, Samantha started to relax a little and felt her tension easing off the steering wheel. Alex seemed to be quite lucid, even after the long trek, and kept assuring the blonde that she didn't feel all that bad.



"I don't think I ever totally lost consciousness, Samantha. The only symptoms of a concussion I have are blurry vision, which only lasted a short period of time, and a headache, which is minimal at this point. I promise to have Gary give me some neuropsychological and reaction time tests, but I'm sure they will all pan out as just fine. Please . . ." she reached her uninjured hand over and touched the blonde's thigh. " . . . stop worrying. We're almost there."

When they turned down the road that led to the clinic, involuntary tears of relief again streamed down Samantha's face. "Thank you," she whispered to no one in particular as the now familiar buildings came into view.

"Everything's going to be alright, Samantha," Alex reassured her. Samantha pulled into a parking space and stopped the Jeep. "Thank you for rescuing us."

Moisture-filled sapphire eyes focused on the tear-streaked face of her lover as Samantha opened Alex's door.

"Look who the champion is today," Alex chided, stroking the freckled face before her with her good hand. "We're both okay now, Samantha. Why don't you go get some help? I'll wait here."

Almost before Alex finished her sentence, Sam turned and hobbled away in the direction of the main building. Within minutes Gary came running toward the Jeep with two employees close behind, one with a wheelchair in tow.

"I thought you knew better than to end up like this, Wonder Woman," Gary muttered as he neared the Jeep.

"Where's Sama-"

"She's fine. I made her stay back in the building. She looks exhausted, Alex, and she needs that limp of hers checked out."

Gary slid his arm around the brunette's back and she put her arms around his neck, allowing him to lift her up and then down into the chair that now resided at the side of the vehicle.

"That was a lot easier than anticipated," the man stated. "I half expected you to fight and refuse the ride."

"Nope, I was ready for the help this time, my friend. I'm a little too humbled to balk at assistance."

"Then let's get you inside and see what kind of damage you did to that beautiful body of yours."

It took less than an hour to thoroughly check out both women. Samantha demanded they work on Alex first, even though Alex expected them to do quite the opposite.

Before doing anything else, Gary insisted on x-raying Alex's wrist and ankle. They had a

radiologist on call for just such situations and he arrived about the time the films were finished. The wrist was definitely just a bad sprain, but the ankle showed a small hairline fracture. What the radiologist couldn't understand was the fact that it looked like it was already well on its way to being healed. He told Gary that, in his opinion, it didn't need to be cast; it merely needed stabilization, and that could be accomplished with wrapping and a cold gel splint.

Because of the pain in her knee, they also x-rayed Samantha's leg and were relieved to find that it was just bruised and strained.

Since Alex had experienced some visual instability that had lasted more than 15 minutes but no loss of consciousness, Gary concluded that she probably had a Grade 2 concussion. Before having her soak her wrist and ankle in ice water to get the swelling in check, he wanted to give her a neuropsychological exam to test her strength, coordination, and sensation. He also did a Standardized Assessment of Concussion and some reaction time tests. By the time he was finished, he was satisfied that it was an uncomplicated concussion, and he had one of the aides bring over two buckets of ice water, one for each injured appendage. Normally, they would have had a medical doctor confirm the findings, but Gary knew Alex well enough to know that allowing him to even run the tests was about as compliant as she was going to get.

With Alex sitting looking pitiful, ankle- and wrist-deep in ice water, Samantha came over and sat by her side. "I imagine we could have both ended up a lot worse off," she whispered into her lover's ear. "I could hardly believe what the radiologist said, Alex-a partially healed fracture. Do you suppose . . ."

"Definitely, Samantha." Alex nodded and touched her lover's face with her good hand. She slowly tilted the blonde's face until she was able to stare into incredibly green eyes. "You truly possess the gift of healing, my love."

"It's so strange, Alex. Never in all my dreams would I have ever imagined being able to do something like that."

"Well, now you can focus your life in another direction, if you're ready to take on that kind of responsibility."

"I am, but I have so much to learn."

"We both do, Samantha, but let's get over this adventure first, okay?"

"Definitely!" The blonde smiled and gave her mate a kiss on the cheek.

The brunette lifted her hand out of the cold water and immediately received a reprimand.

"You know," Gary shouted from across the room, "that has to stay in there longer than that, Alex. Ice is your friend, remember?"

"Fuck the ice! You get your sorry ass over here and put your hand in this bucket of . . ."

"Whoa there, girl-back up," Gary ordered. "Sounds like you're feeling better, but you're extremely lucky that neither of those sprains are swollen beyond recognition, especially after walking on that ankle. Now be a good little patient and put your hand back into the ice. It's only for a little while; I have a gel splint cooling in the freezer."

Samantha smiled at the thought of someone bullying Alex and then chuckled to herself when she saw the usually stubborn and self-confident woman obey the order to resubmerge her hand in the cold liquid.

"Don't you think Samantha needs some ice on her knee?" Alex asked sarcastically.

"As a matter of fact, I've got a wrap-around cooling for just that purpose. She'll be joining you in just a bit." Gary smiled over at Samantha, who was now grimacing in his direction.

Attempting to take Alex's attention from the present situation, Samantha asked what they were going to do about flying out of Sedona.

Before the brunette had time to answer, Gary, who had been bringing the two of them something to relax their muscles, answered for her. "There is no way Alex is flying out of here tomorrow, not with those injuries. I think you should either change your plans and extend your stay for a week or call your mother and Kelley and have them come fly you home."

"Oh, that sounds real grown up, now doesn't it?" Alex's eyes practically threw daggers at her friend. "Call my Moms and have them come rescue us."

"You know both of them love Sedona. They could fly here tomorrow, stay a day or two, and then Kelley could fly you all back. Alex, be reasonable; there's no way you can fly with either that wrist or ankle in the shape they're in. You know better than to think any different."

"I don't know that I couldn't . . ."

"I don't think so, Alex," Samantha joined in.

"Think rationally, Alex," Gary reiterated. "Even if you don't want to think about yourself, do you want to put Samantha in jeopardy by trying to fly when you're injured?"

The ice that was gathering in her sapphire eyes melted when he mentioned putting Samantha in harm's way. The injured woman looked over at her lover and thought more about what the consequences of her being stubborn might bring.

Samantha looked from one to the other, not sure what to make of the situation and hoping that Alex would soon cease being so obstinate.

Finally, Alex grudgingly agreed, "I guess it wouldn't hurt to ask Mom and Kelley if they'd like to take a short vacation. I really didn't plan on being away from the Center for another week, but I'll

call in the morning and see how things are going." She turned to Samantha and smiled weakly. "Is that okay with you, Samantha?"

"Whatever you decide is okay with me, Alex. Like Gary said, you can't be flying the plane yourself right now, and you know you probably shouldn't be up walking around on that ankle a whole lot, either. If everything is going smoothly at the Center without us, it would probably be better to stay here until you're better. Since Mom and Kelley are expecting us back in La Jolla on Monday, you have to call them anyway. What you decide about them coming or us simply staying here longer is entirely up to you."

Shaking her head as though she had just lost a major battle, Alex confirmed she would think on it and call her parents in the morning, one way or the other.

Gary walked over to the small refrigerator and then back to Samantha carrying a knee wrap with a cold gel insert. He motioned for Samantha to sit down while he put it on her leg. Then, deciding it was time to change the subject, he made a suggestion. "Listen, why don't we go down to the dining room and get the two of you something to eat? You must be starving by now."

He received a huge smile from Samantha before she verbally responded. "Actually, for the first time since I can't remember when, I forgot I was hungry. But now that you mention it, food sounds marvelous." She turned to her lover, who was still pouting. "How about you, Alex; think some dinner might improve our state of mind?"

"I don't know about state of mind, but it surely will improve my physical stamina," Alex answered. "All of a sudden, with the mere mention of food, I find myself hungry enough to eat a horse." She laughed when she spied the look on Gary's face. "Well, that statement sure got a rise out of you, now didn't it?" she asked.

"Never thought I would hear that particular phrase coming from your lips, Alex," her friend teased back at her. "I don't know about horse, but I know we have a large choice of food items to whet the palate of any non-meat loving vegetarian."

Samantha clung to the back of the wheelchair that Alex was coerced into, and Gary didn't try to offer to do the pushing. He realized that Samantha probably needed the chair as much for support as for the comfort of knowing that she and Alex were both back and as safe as could be expected after the ordeal they had just been through.

Neither woman had mentioned the past life experiences to any of the people present in the clinic. Although they hadn't really talked about how they were going to handle confiding in anyone else, it seemed to be an unspoken pact between them that tonight was not the time to try. Before talking freely about the experience, even with people as open-minded as Gary and his crew, they needed to talk about it privately.

After dinner Gary went up to the rooms with them to say goodnight. He handed Samantha a single crutch for Alex to use if she insisted on hobbling around, and made Alex promise to use it. He placed the muscle relaxants, analgesics, and an extra gel insert for the splint in the kitchen

area. "Try to get her to keep the ice on for a while tonight, Samantha," he whispered to the blonde. "The longer she can keep it on, the less she'll swell and the quicker the healing process can begin. That goes for your knee wrap, also."

Samantha nodded that she would do her best.

"I know she's stubborn," he affirmed loudly enough for both women to hear. Then his voice softened, "I'm glad you two got out with as little damage as you did. Things could have been a lot worse if Alex hadn't been able to hobble along on that ankle." He gave both of them a hug and kiss and was on his way back down the hall before it registered to either of the women that the glistening in his eyes had been tears.

"He really is just a big, old teddy bear, Samantha." Alex half-mumbled.

"I know, and he thinks the world of you, Alex."

"I think he's grown rather fond of you, too," Alex countered.

The evening was still young, but after the ordeal of the afternoon, all the two women wanted to do was relax. Gary had warned Alex to follow protocol, but as usual, Alex had other plans in mind. She wanted nothing more than to sit in a warm Jacuzzi with Samantha and wash off the layer of red dust that still clung to them and their clothes. When she looked into the mirror, the coloring on her face brought back vivid memories of the visions they had experienced just hours before. She started to make the suggestion about bathing, and then thought better of it. She shook her head and let her physical therapy training kick in; she knew that hot water could totally reverse all the good the cold had done. Instead, she requested that Samantha start the water for a shower.

There was a seat in the stall, and after the blonde helped her lover undress with as little discomfort as possible, she helped her over to the seat.

Minutes later they were both enjoying the warm liquid as it covered their tired, bruised bodies.

"Well, my Destiny, you will never be able to say that your initial visit to Sedona was dull or ordinary."

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," Samantha agreed as she picked up the sponge and began washing the stubborn red dust from Alex's back. "You look more like your ancient self right now than your present," the blonde chortled as she brought the sponge around to draw a streak down her lover's face.

Trying to avoid pressure on sensitive areas made the bathing and drying a bit more tedious than usual, but they finally finished and were soon lying side by side on the bed. Alex had allowed Samantha to put the wrist splint on but told her lover there was no need for the sling while she was sleeping and that she wouldn't need the ankle splint again until morning.

Alex was glad that it wasn't her right wrist she had hurt, because that would have caused some major problems getting into their usual sleeping positions. With everything else that had happened today, she didn't want to not be able to hold Samantha in bed. With Alex's arm around the smaller woman's shoulder and the blonde's arm around Alex's waist, it was the first time since their plunge through the floor of the cave that the two truly felt safe.

"I don't know about you, Alex, but between the muscle relaxants Gary gave us and the physical exhaustion, I'm going to sleep like a log tonight." She cuddled closer to her mate and squeezed her gently. "I love you, Alex. I'm so glad we got out of there okay today. I hope you feel better in the morning."

"I'm sure I will, Samantha. I hope you do, too."

"Sweet dreams, Alex."

Samantha smiled when she felt the mesmerizing touch of her lover's hand upon her head. It had become like second nature now-Alex running her fingers through Samantha's soft golden locks while the two of them drifted off to sleep.

The blonde sighed deeply when her lover placed a final goodnight kiss on her crown and then whispered, "I love you, too, Samantha. Any adventure that ends up with me holding you in my arms is successful in my book. Sweet dreams to you, my Destiny. See you in the morning."

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Early morning sun trickled through the windows and danced on the walls, but it went quite unnoticed by the lovers still locked in each other's arms. Even Alex continued to sleep peacefully past her normal wake-up time. When she finally did awaken, she wondered whether it was the pills, the exhaustion of the experience, or the security of being close to Samantha that had allowed her the luxury of sleeping in.

"Good morning, Samantha," she whispered as she kissed the head nestled beneath her chin.

"Hmmm," replied the sleeping blonde. "Is it really morning already? Can't you turn the clock back a few hours?"

"I do believe we already did that. You don't have to get up yet if you don't want to." Alex removed her arm from around the smaller woman's body and started to get out of bed. She slowed her movements as injured areas that had felt good lying still began screaming at her. She had been in one position all night long, and her body was not at all happy at being moved. An involuntary groan escaped her lips, shaking the sleep from Samantha's head. The blonde propped up on one elbow.

"Are you okay, Alex?"

"Just a little stiff from lying so still all night, sweetheart. Go back to sleep."

"Uh huh. You just wait here until I go get the crutch."

"I can get the crutch myself, Samantha," Alex started to argue.

"I don't think so; we left it in the living room, and I don't want you putting full weight on that ankle. Gary also said so--and you know better."

Reluctantly, Alex remained seated on the bed while Samantha rolled off on the other side and limped into the other room.

"Doesn't look like your body's doing exactly what it's told, either," Alex's voice trailed after the blonde.

"Yeah, well, at least it's moving, and I'm thankful for small favors," the reply filtered back from the kitchen. "You just stay there; I'm going to put the tea on while I'm out here. I'll just be a minute."

Alex threw her body backward on the bed with a disgusted "Humph!" She absolutely hated feeling helpless and that was exactly how she was feeling right now. After lying quietly for a few minutes, she sat back up. "Samantha, I'm getting up; I have to pee."

Before she was finished with the sentence, the blonde came through the door carrying the crutch. "My, my. Aren't we testy today? I have to pee, too, and guess what? I'm going to beat you to it."

"Samantha!"

"But here, I'll give you this to get started, and meet you in the bathroom." She handed Alex the crutch and then ran toward the bathroom door.

Alex gave a painful sounding groan as she rose to a standing position.

Hearing the exclamation, Samantha turned around and started back to help her mate, until she saw the gleam in Alex's eyes.

"Alexis Dorian, you're playing me for a sucker!"

There was now a full smile radiating across the brunette's face. She maneuvered herself up to stand in front of the smaller woman.

"Gotcha!"

"That's not funny!" Samantha protested. "Didn't you ever hear of the boy who cried wolf?"

"Of course I did, silly, but I don't think he needed to go to the bathroom as much as I do right now."

Samantha couldn't help but give in when she saw the look of real anguish on her lover's face. The tall woman might be a physical therapist, but as Samantha had stated before, she was certainly a lousy patient. At least she was in excellent physical condition and knew how to maneuver the crutch to her advantage, but she was used to moving with the speed of the hare, not the tortoise.

"You go ahead, Alex. I'll go check on the tea and be right back."

"You do that," the brunette smiled as she took her position on the seat of honor.

Although Alex was moving slower than usual, Samantha felt that her eyes looked a lot clearer than they had the day before, and there was normal color in her face again. Alex's recuperative abilities amazed her, but she was determined to make the stubborn woman follow Gary's orders and wear the gel splint whenever she was up and moving around.

"Hey, I don't want to be putting that on before I even have a cup of tea," Alex whined when Samantha came back into the bedroom carrying the splint.

"Do you realize you sound like me?" Samantha replied. "Gary said ice was your friend last night and today."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Alex don't get nasty, please; I'm only trying to-"

"I know, hon. I'm sorry. Give me the damn thing." Alex sat back down on the bed and reached for the splint. Taking it from Samantha, she grumbled again about having to wear it. Samantha reminded her that she was lucky she wasn't in a full cast.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," came the sarcastic comment. "On a more serious note, do you have any more of the leaves you used in the cave? You know, they really took the pain away. Besides, I hate relying on pills."

The blonde smiled and went to retrieve her backpack from the floor. "Actually, I do. I grabbed a handful. I even have some more of the root. You know, Alex, I should really try to find the names of the leaves and the root. Where do you suggest I start?"

"There's a Hopi trading post on the outskirts of town. We can drive out to it and ask someone there. If anyone knows the indigenous plants in the area, it's the local Indians." She smiled at her lover. "After all, it was a very special Indian who led you to them in the first place."

Samantha walked back into the kitchen area ahead of Alex, poured their tea, and set the cups on the table before sitting down next to her lover.

"So . . . what are we going to do?"



"Let me give Kim a call at the Center and see how everything's going before we decide on that, okay?"

"Sure, but you have to call the moms either way, right?"

"Right, Samantha. I'll call and tell them what happened and why we won't be home tomorrow. But let me call Alternative Paradise first. In fact, I'll do that right now and get it out of the way." She started to get up from the table but felt a small hand on top of her own that gently kept her from rising.

"I'll bring it to you."

"Samantha, I'm able to get up and get the phone," Alex protested.

"Why can't you just let me do the little things and stop fighting? If you insist on getting up every time you want something, that ankle is never going to have the opportunity to heal properly. I know you don't like feeling helpless, Alex, but you've got to think about the outcome. Isn't it better to let me do things now and have you get better sooner?"

"Okay, okay--that's enough of the lecture. You're right. I'll try to stop letting my ego get in the way and let the body heal. So . . ." Alex shrugged her shoulders and pointed to the telephone.

"Good girl." Samantha picked up the receiver and handed it to Alex. "I'll go use the bathroom while you make the call. I'll be right back."

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

Samantha walked into the other room, and Alex dialed the familiar number. Minutes later the blonde came back into the kitchen area to find her lover sitting pensively, looking out the window.

"So . . . what's the verdict?"

Without turning around Alex began softly, "You know, Samantha, I don't know whether to be pleased or disturbed. It's either that we did a damn good job in picking and training the personnel or we're just not that important."

Two small arms draped themselves around the tall woman's shoulders. "Are you jealous of the monster you created, my love? I guess you're trying to tell me that the show is running along quite smoothly without us?"

"Exactly! And I'm not sure how I feel about it." Glistening sapphire eyes searched emerald green for understanding, and Alex was not disappointed.

"Alex, you told me yourself this was part of your plan. You said you wanted to build the Center and then be able to take off and travel and know that it would operate at optimum efficiency even

if you were not physically there. You accomplished what you set out to do; you should be proud of yourself."

"I am. I'm proud of both of us for hiring the right crew and teaching them to work as a team. It's just that I feel . . ."

"Useless?"

"Well, I wouldn't go **quite** that far; I feel helpless right here--I don't need to feel useless, too." She chuckled and grabbed one of Samantha's hands, bringing it to her lips for a quick kiss. "I guess I didn't expect it to all gel so quickly. They're doing fine with the clinic patients, the doctors are happy, and all the classes that have been scheduled are running smoothly. Of course, in another week an entire new set of lectures will be set into place and no one really knows enough about that aspect of the Center to set them up, so we will have to be back by the first. It seems you're more indispensable than I am."

"Uh, huh--don't go there, Alex--no pity party here. You're the coordinator, for gods' sake; don't go getting ridiculous on me."

"Okay." The brunette nodded in agreement and then continued. "What do you think to giving the moms a call and inviting them to come spend a few days with us here and then letting Kelley fly us all home?"

"Sounds like a great idea to me; that way, I don't have to worry about you overdoing any of your injuries. Remember, you have to be in perfect condition by the end of October when we go up to visit Sonny and Ray."

"How could I forget?" Alex turned around in the chair and pulled the smaller woman close to her. "Guess we get an extended vacation. The only problem is I'm really not in much shape to be amorous, what with two limbs swollen and painful."

"I'm into snuggling. You can still snuggle, can't you?"

"Absolutely."

"And kiss? Your lips didn't get bruised, did they?" She started to giggle and Alex aided in the process by tickling her with an uninjured hand.

Samantha took advantage of the fact that Alex could not hold onto her easily with her left hand in a splint. She stepped away from the seated woman and shook her finger at Alex. "No fair tickling! Besides, you're just going to get yourself hurt. I think you're not the only one able to take advantage of this situation."

"Okay! Truce," Alex agreed. "What do you say to going downstairs and having a pancake breakfast?"

"I say it's time to get dressed! Want to ask Gary to join us?" Samantha queried.

"Sure, but be prepared to get the third degree," her lover warned.

It took longer than usual for the two women to get dressed and maneuver themselves downstairs to the dining area. When they finally reached the dining room, Gary waved them over to the table where he had been sitting, anxiously awaiting their arrival.

"Time to fill me in on all the gory details," he blurted out.

"And a good morning to you, too, my friend," Alex responded, slowly lowering herself into the chair next to him.

"Sorry, Alex, I'm just curious as to how you got back to the Jeep without totally fucking up that ankle of yours."

The women seemed to dance around the events that had taken place after Samantha climbed out of the pit. They exchanged glances throughout the conversation, taking turns telling bits and pieces of the story. Gary kept looking from one to the other, trying to follow the tale. Finally, with an incredulous look on his face, he sighed deeply and shook his head.

"Can you give me a reason for all the evasive chatter?" he pleaded.

Alex couldn't keep from grinning when she looked at her friend. "Oh, the hell with it," she mumbled, and blurted out the real story. She did most of the speaking, with Samantha occasionally interrupting and adding her own take on the experience.

Gary didn't utter a word until the vocal re-enactment ended.

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Alex was going to change the subject when Gary found his voice. "That's the most incredible story I've ever heard, and living around here I've heard some tall tales, believe me. Damn! I've been through my own regression and found the experience thrilling, but to actually see a vision of your former self--even with the aches and pains you'll be dealing with for a while--I'd consider that excursion into the canyon a success."

"We kind of feel the same way," Samantha agreed.

"Wait 'til your parents hear about it, Alex. Aurora's going to be exhilarated; it proves some of the theories she's been postulating for years." Gary turned to Alex. "Have you decided what you're going to do about getting home?"

"Yes, I'm going to call Mom and Kelley when we're done here and fill them in on what happened. I think I'll leave out the revelations until they arrive."

"That sounds practical enough; otherwise, knowing Aurora, you'll be on the phone for hours," Gary agreed. "Also, I want the two of you back in the clinic before you leave for town. I'd like to

put some magnets on your knee and wrist, Alex, and a couple on Sam's knee."

"Magnets?" The blonde gave her friend a skeptical look. "I thought we were weird, talking about reincarnation," she giggled.

"They're special magnets used to help speed up the healing process."

"Oh. You know, I have read about them--in one of the sports magazines at the Center," Samantha countered, looking pensive.

"We've found them to be quite an asset in most cases. Sometimes the bruising even disappears overnight. It never hurts to stack the odds in your favor," Gary reassured her as he got up from the table and kissed her gingerly on the cheek. "I'd like to see the two of you leave here in good condition; after all, this is a healing center. I'll see you before you go into town, but right now I'm running a little late for an appointment. See ya soon."

The women left the dining room soon after Gary. Alex wanted to avoid having to walk any more than necessary, so she used the phone in the lobby to call California while Samantha busied herself with some of the literature on the tables.

When Alex finally returned the phone to its cradle she was sporting a look of satisfaction.

"That was actually a lot easier than I thought it was going to be."

Samantha scooted closer to her lover. "Whatdaya mean?"

"Well, I thought I might get a lecture about hiking in unknown territory and being unprepared, but Mom was just concerned that we were both okay. Kelley said there was no problem with them coming here and flying us home. She said Mom deserved a little time off anyway. She's been working hard on her new book and could use a little change of scenery. Of course, I know we'll have a lot of explaining to do once they do arrive, but I know Mom will get so caught up in the past-lives experience that she'll probably forget all about us getting hurt."

With her right hand she tenderly brushed a strand of hair from Samantha's forehead. Her demeanor had changed and her brow was furrowed. "We were really lucky, you know?"

"Yes. We were." Samantha agreed. "But getting back on a lighter subject, when should we expect your folks?"

"Hopefully, Tuesday sometime. Kelley's going to let me know this afternoon, after she calls for reservations. So, are you ready to go get tortured?"

"Not me. I only have a few aches and bruises; you're the one he really wants to see." Samantha helped her lover up off the couch and slowly the two of them headed in the direction of the therapy room.

The next hour was spent with Gary fawning over them like a mother hen. He wanted to make sure that Alex didn't have any additional problems from the concussion, so he went ahead and did a few more tests.

Alex trusted Gary almost more than she trusted herself when it came to the process of healing. He had been working in the field for more years than she had and had delved deeper into the spiritual aspect of recovery. By the time he was finished, he had talked them out of leaving the Center to go into town for the afternoon. He had counted on Alex's professionalism to kick in and make her realize that walking around on her ankle would only slow the mending process. She agreed to give the injury an extra day or two to heal, stating that they could go to the trading post when they went to pick Aurora and Kelley up at the airport.

Gary promised that if they would behave themselves and relax for the rest of the afternoon, he would send someone over to the video store to get them whatever movies they desired. To make the compromise even sweeter, he told Samantha he would make sure the kitchen made pizza for dinner and have someone bring one up to the suite.

With the promise of one of her favorite meals and sitting around watching movies all day, Samantha was in her own little heaven. Alex, on the other hand, felt less thrilled at the prospect of having nothing to do all day but watch videos, but when she saw the look of elation on her lover's face, she gave in.

"What movies would you like to see?" the blonde leaned over and asked her partner.

"I don't really care, Samantha. You go ahead and pick whatever you want." The brunette smiled sweetly into the angelic face. "I'm a captive audience today."

In all honesty, Alex was glad for the chance to just sit and relax; she didn't feel as chipper as she was letting on. She realized that it would do her good to not be limping around on the wounded ankle. Samantha promised to repeat the hands-on treatment she had performed in the cave, and the brunette was anxiously looking forward to that aspect of the afternoon.

After Samantha put in her movie order, the two women returned to their rooms. Samantha made some popcorn and poured them both a glass of tea. "At least we'll be ready when the munchies hit," she stated as she brought the refreshments into the living room and placed them on the coffee table. A knock on the door soon heralded the arrival of the entertainment, and the two settled in for a sedentary afternoon.

Continued in Part 14...

# ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## Part 14

### Chapter 14

A tapping sound jolted the lovers from a sound sleep. Alex loosened her hold on Samantha and reached for the table lamp switch. The room was unusually dark.

"Um . . . who's there?" she croaked before stretching to read the clock in the kitchen area.

"Ah, excuse me, Ms. Dorian," an apologetic male voice filtered through the door. "It's Jeff, from the kitchen. Mr. Black asked that I bring you up a pizza."

By the time Jeff was finished with his sentence, Samantha had her hand on the knob and was opening the door.

"Thanks," she smiled at the young man. "It smells marvelous!"

"Mr. Black said it was getting kind of late and he hadn't heard from either of you. He didn't want you to miss dinner, so here I am." He handed the large covered tray to Samantha and turned to

go.

"Tell Gary, um, Mr. Black, we said thanks, and that we really appreciate the delivery," Samantha called after him as he started down the hallway.

"Will do. Enjoy!" He waved at her without turning around.

Samantha sniffed at the pizza while carrying it into the kitchen. She grabbed two plates and some extra napkins and proceeded into the living room. "I guess we were more tired than we thought. I don't think I saw 15 minutes of the second movie before I was out like a light."

"Ditto. But I'm awake now and that pizza will not last long, I guarantee." Alex took the plate Samantha had filled for her and placed it on her lap.

True to her words, it didn't take long for them to devour their dinner. Samantha rewound the movie, and they actually watched it the second time.

"Why don't you try doing what you did on my head before to my wrist and ankle? Would you mind? It would be good practice." The brunette smiled at her lover, who turned away from the television when the credits started to flood the screen.

"You know, I'm not sure exactly what it was I did in the cave, Alex. I just kind of placed my hands on your head and could feel where the throbbing came from."

"No time like the present for an encore performance."

A pensive look crossed the freckled face as Samantha helped Alex remove the sling Gary had insisted she wear during the day. The ice had definitely kept the swelling to a minimum, but the skin circling the tall woman's wrist was a deep purple.

"Damn, that looks painful." Samantha could feel the tears welling in her eyes as she inspected the damaged area. "You have some bruising on the shoulder, too."

"It looks worse than it feels, honey," Alex reassured her. "It was inevitable that the shoulder would discolor a little after the shock it received in the fall. In a few days I'll be as good as new, promise."

"If that were the case, Alex, Gary wouldn't have suggested you call Kelley to come fly the plane."

"I didn't say the ankle would be as good as new," the brunette retorted. "Besides, with a few days rest, I could have probably flown home."

"Uh huh." Samantha nodded her head and smiled. "I'm just as glad you decided to call your folks."

Positioning one hand on either side of and slightly above the bruised wrist, Samantha could feel a difference in the temperature of the skin as she slowly moved her hands around the area. Her palms began to emit what felt like a surge of warmth as she concentrated on relieving the pain in her lover's wrist.

"I can feel the heat coming from your hands, Samantha."

"I think I can feel the area of the most damage," the blonde replied as she worked on the injury.

They agreed that putting a movie on might be distracting to the healing process, so instead the two women sat and rehashed all that had happened to them the past few days. The entire time they talked, Samantha worked on Alex's wrist and ankle. When she looked like she was beginning to tire, Alex insisted that she stop and that they get ready for bed.

"One more day of relaxation is my limit," Alex commented as they turned down the bedspread and climbed on the bed.

"We'll see what your parents have to say about that." Green eyes twinkled as the blonde teased and then waited for a reaction.

When she didn't receive the expected answer, Samantha lifted her head to spot a tear trickling down Alex's face.

The tip of her finger caught the drop as it rolled down her lover's chin.

"Alex, what's the matter, honey?"

The dark-haired woman turned her head, only to have a small hand turn it back, forcing her to look into concerned verdant eyes.

"I feel so helpless and vulnerable. I haven't felt like this since I was a child, and I hate it!"

"No one likes to feel powerless, Alex."

"You don't understand, Samantha . . ."

"No! You don't understand, Alex. You're not Superwoman, even though you've made yourself out to be one for all these years. You're flesh and bones like everyone else, and you can even break. I don't know why you feel you have to hold onto this façade, but it really is time to let it go. You could have been killed trying to keep me from getting hurt; how do you think it makes me feel to look at your injuries and know that all I have is a small limp because you took the brunt of the fall? I love you, but sometimes you can be a real pain in the ass, Alexis Dorian."

Alex placed two slender fingers across the pouting lips of her lover and shook her head. "You're absolutely right-I'm not Superwoman-I think this little escapade shows that quite clearly. But," and her voice took on a deeper more serious tone, "don't you **ever** think that I wouldn't react



exactly the same way again. You're the most precious thing in my life, Samantha-your safety will always be my responsibility."

Samantha began to interrupt but was quickly stifled.

"Remember when we first met and I told you I would be there for you if you fell?"

The blonde gently nodded her head.

"I will always be there if you stumble or fall, Samantha." Alex hugged the smaller woman closer and kissed her on the top of her head. "By the way, my wrist and ankle feel much better after your treatment tonight, thank you."

Samantha mumbled, "I'm glad, and you're more than welcome."

"I don't know about you, but I'm tired again," Alex confessed. "Must be all the resting we did today." She giggled and pulled the smaller woman closer. "Sweet dreams, my Destiny."

"Sweet dreams, Alex."

Although they were both more tired than either of them would have thought, the lovers lay in each other's arms without sleeping for a long time. Each was lost in a world of her own where thoughts of "what if" and "why" floated aimlessly around in circles. Visions of the Indian maiden and brave graced the mind of both women as they closed their eyes to sleep. Alex thought she could feel Samantha's heart beating faster as she gently squeezed her in a soft embrace.

The past-life experience had set Samantha off on a new course in her life and gave her something to strive for that had never been there before.

For Alex it was an epiphany that all she had been taught through her childhood had, indeed, been true. In her heart of hearts, she had always been afraid that perhaps her mother merely had a highly intelligent but overactive imagination. Now she knew there was more truth than fiction in her mother's philosophy.

The evening grew late before the two lovers became dreamers, and even then, they shared a common bond as each relived her own special memory of the Indians' visitation.

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Again the sun was well above the horizon when sapphire blues batted their way into wakefulness. The weekend was over, and by all rights Alex had planned on having the two of them back in California and headed toward Alternative Paradise by this time. Of course, life had decided a different route would be taken by the women, causing them to stop for a day or two and merely enjoy the beautiful surroundings. Alex had no problem with enjoyment. What she did have a problem with was not being able to move around as usual.

Her body still rebelled to movement as she began to unwind from the small woman snuggled up against her. *No sense in making her get out of bed because I can't sleep.*

But it seemed that Samantha was tuned in to Alex's every move.

"You okay, Alex?"

"Sure, honey. I'm just getting cramped being in this one position, and I can't force myself to sleep any more this morning. I'm going to get up; you can go back to sleep, okay?"

"No."

The answer took Alex totally by surprise and she stopped inching toward the edge of the bed. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean if you're getting up, I am, too."

"That's silly. I know how much you like to sleep in."

"I slept most of yesterday away. I even slept through a movie. I think I can manage to see the sun before she reaches her noon position today." Green eyes now sparkled as the blonde rubbed the remainder of sleep from them before scooting up and planting a kiss on the full lips of her lover. "Hum, you taste great! You want to . . ."

"Samantha, I'd love to, but . . ."

"I know," the smaller woman pouted. "It's just that you look so . . ."

"If you say helpless . . ."

The blonde wore an impish grin as she kissed Alex on the cheek. "I wouldn't think of insulting you like that." She giggled, slid off the bed, and hobbled into the bathroom.

The rest of the morning cruised by. Alex used the laptop to catch up on her e-mail, and Samantha sat on the porch doing some writing. They met Gary for lunch, watched another movie, and played a game they had borrowed from the recreation room.

By the end of the evening both of the women were feeling immensely better and anticipating that by the following day doing a little shopping with the moms would not be too difficult a task for either of them.

Wrapped contentedly in each other's arms, they bid the evening adieu with no more than a final good night to each other. The day had been long, even though it had been uneventful, and their bodies were still in a recuperative mode, allowing sleep to find them easily.

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Being driven to the airport while sitting in the passenger's seat was not the way the independent Alexis Dorian had intended on greeting her mother the next time she saw her. But Alex was not a fool and realized that calling her parents to come and fly her and Samantha home was probably the least selfish and most practical thing she could have done.

She knew "headstrong" and "independent" were duplicate middle names of hers. She had tried her damndest in the past to be totally self-sufficient and not rely on her folks for help to resolve minor and even some major setbacks in her life. She was aware that she hurt her mother's feelings when she didn't include the older woman in some of her daily activities, but that had been the way their relationship played out, and she had always expected her mother to simply deal with it. Now things were slowly changing, and she was being drawn closer to her family, probably because she realized how much Samantha relied on family influence. Alex was even beginning to realize just how selfish she had been these past years by shutting her parents out of important events in her life. Since Samantha's mother was no longer the main figure in her life, it seemed like Aurora had the fortune to fill a much-needed void. Samantha loved being with Aurora, and the feeling was obviously mutual.

The brunette laughed to herself as the car turned the corner and came in sight of the airport. Her final thought before spying the plane carrying her parents to her aid was that this must be what married life was all about.

"Well, are you ready to greet your saviors?" Alex kidded as she turned and faced an unsmiling Samantha.

"I wouldn't go that far, but do you realize how lucky you are that your parents can put their lives on hold to come and help us, or that they'd even want to, for that matter?"

Putting her hands up in surrender, Alex quickly tried to change the subject. "Hey, girl, I didn't mean to start World War III here; I was just kidding."

The blonde's features softened, and she placed a hand on Alex's cheek. "I know you were only kidding, honey, but I don't think you realize just how great your parents are."

"Sure I do." The brunette shrugged her shoulders. She grasped the small hand on her cheek and continued, "I just don't like feeling like a child, and right now I am feeling rather juvenile having to have the moms come and take me home."

"At least they're around to do it, Alex. Think what it would be like if you didn't have them to rely on when you really needed help." Samantha smiled warmly. "I really can see both sides, honey, and I know you could have 'bought' us out of this, but isn't nice you have family who come to help when you need them?"

Without waiting for an answer Samantha brought the car to a halt. She faced her companion. "I love you, Alex. Thanks for stepping down into the child's position and calling your folks; everyone needs to be needed occasionally, even moms."

Samantha leaned over and kissed away a small tear, as it trickled down Alex's face. "Now, get rid of that wet stuff, or Mom's going to think you're in pain. She'll really go into mother mode then, and you'll find yourself being pampered a whole lot more than you bargained for." Receiving the smile that the comment called for, Samantha directed her attention to the runway where a small jet was coming down for a landing.

Even though the gasp was small, Samantha heard Alex's reaction as she spied the plane that was now grinding to a halt on the tarmac.

"What is it, Alex? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"It's nothing." Alex started to stutter, losing her normal poise and control. "I just . . . um . . . I wasn't expecting them to ask . . . oh . . . Uncle Al to fly them here."

"Uncle Al? Great, I get to meet another relative. You don't talk much about your relatives, honey. Whose brother is this?"

"Kelley's," she answered without taking her eyes off the plane. "Before we go any further, I need to tell you that he's gay, too. So, we're all just one happy family!" She shook her head and she grabbed her lover's hand. "Bear with me, darlin', you're about to embark on an unforgettable adventure."

The questioning look on Samantha's face made the taller woman smile. Then Alex tried to quickly explain.

"Uncle Al is the black sheep of the family, even though there are so many of us on the gray side that he barely stands out anymore. He's Kelley's older brother, and I think he came out to Gram when he was about five." She couldn't help but grin at the incredulous look on her lover's face. "That's just to say that Gram was not at all surprised when Al blurted out a week before the male equivalent to the debutante ball that the only girl he would even consider appearing with would be Kelley. He refused to escort the debutante his father had picked out for him and announced that either his sister would be at his side or his date would be wearing a tux like he was. My grandfather knew there was no arguing with him. Consequently, Kelley was Uncle Al's date for his societal coming-out party. Listen, honey, I don't have time to go into all this before they come tripping off that plane. Let me just say that if you like the Auntie Mame character, you're gonna love my Uncle Al. He's as close to a free spirit as you are ever going to meet and . . ."

The plane had completed its landing and the passenger door was opening. Alex sped up her explanation with a promise to fill Samantha in on all the details later that evening when they were alone. The blonde smiled broadly at her partner's uneasiness.

"This is definitely going to be fun," Samantha chortled. She grinned even broader when a hint of red began to paint Alex's cheeks.

As the three relatives approached the Jeep, baggage in hand, Alex whispered, "Samantha, please

don't be surprised if Uncle Al is extremely doting."

That final confession only heightened the enthusiasm that had been building ever since the blonde saw the jet on the airfield. "Oh, this is absolutely going to be an evening to remember!"

Just as Samantha was about to open her door, it was graciously opened for her by an extremely handsome, white-haired man. The blonde looked up into piercing gray eyes that were the exact color of Kelley's, and there was no doubt that this gorgeous man was a Dorian.

A rich tenor voice greeted her ears. "You must be the new addition to our little family." Sparkling gray eyes glanced in her direction before lighting on Alex's face. "I'm Uncle Al, and by the look of the expression on little Al's face, this is the first you've heard about me."

Samantha did a double take at Alex being called "Little Al." She didn't know whether to laugh or hide the giggle, and did a very poor job of concealing her surprise at the pet name.

"Okay, Uncle Al, you don't have to embarrass me before you even get properly introduced." Alex was quick to regain her composure. "This is Samantha. Samantha, this, as he has already introduced himself, is Uncle Al."

By this time the man was over on the other side of the car and getting as much of a hug as the wounded Alex could muster.

"It's been quite a while, munchkin." The large man enveloped the woman sitting in the front seat of the car.

"Al, how about letting someone else get in a hello, instead of hogging the entire conversation?" Kelley was standing on Samantha's side of the vehicle and Aurora was behind Al on Alex's. "Let Aurora in to say hi to Alex."

With the look of a wounded animal, the tall man stepped back to let his sister-in-law take his place at her daughter's side.

"Hi, sweetie." Aurora leaned in and kissed her daughter tenderly. "How are you feeling?"

At the same time, Kelley greeted Samantha, and for a few seconds, the conversations became a hodgepodge of hellos and informal greetings. In the middle of the cacophony, Uncle Al interrupted with the suggestion that he drive them all to wherever it was they were going to eat before his stomach embarrassed him, and that perhaps they could then get a singular conversation going so everyone could be involved.

He loaded all the suitcases in the back of the Jeep and helped Samantha from the car. She stepped out from the behind the wheel and joined Kelley and Aurora in the back seat, and Uncle Al took her place in the driver's seat.

"Good, now we can get this little party headed in the right direction. So . . . seafood or pasta?"

Not waiting for an answer, he put the car in gear and started for the highway.

Sandwiched between the two women in the back seat, Samantha occasionally would glance at Al and then Alex, at Aurora and then Kelley. The resemblance between Alex and her uncle was uncanny, but then she guessed it was not any more so than that between Alex and Kelley. She kept thinking that Alex was certainly a combination of the looks of both of her parents. If Samantha hadn't known better, she would have sworn that they were all blood relatives. Her mind doted for a second on artificial insemination, and she marveled at the accomplishments of science. That thought led to one concerning her and Alex discussing the possibility of starting a family of their own some day.

When they reached their destination, Al got out of the car and walked around to the passenger side. He opened the door, picked Alex up off the front seat, and carried her into the building.

Samantha received a warning look from her lover not to laugh, and Aurora reinforced the look with a whisper into Samantha's ear. "It would be best for your relationship to play down what Al just did as much as possible." She giggled and hugged the small blonde close. "He never could get over the fact that she's all grown up. This is just an excuse for him to pamper her like he used to when she was little."

Samantha did her best to keep a straight face as she walked into the restaurant between Aurora and Kelley. She had never seen Alex look so childlike; it warmed her heart.

The conversation never paled the entire evening. It covered everything that had happened to the two campers, interspersed with the adventure that Uncle Al had just experienced on a safari in Africa. Samantha was interested in hearing all about his escapades, and he was far from shy when it came to being the center of attraction. Aurora, on the other hand, was interested in the experience the girls had had with their former selves, and Kelley was concerned with their physical well-being and whether or not they should be out gallivanting around the countryside.

Alex assured Kelley that they had rested for the past few days and were both well on their way to recovery. She mentioned that they had wanted to stop at the trading post, but the request was put aside when early evening turned late with no break in the conversation.

Whenever Aurora could get Samantha alone for a few minutes, their dialogue trickled back to the spirit encounter. Samantha loved being the center of attention with her mentor and was more than happy to fill the author in on all the details of the adventure.

On the way back to the clinic, Kelley, Al, and Alex discussed the anticipated weather conditions for takeoff on Thursday. Al had to leave for an appointment in New York Friday night, and Kelley wanted to get back to California before the weekend. While the pilots were busy discussing flight plans, the two writers had a little more time to chat about a more intriguing subject.

"I know I've been writing about past-life regression, dealing with your past lives, and meditating into them, but Samantha, an encounter such as the one you and Alex experienced proves how

blurred the line is between one life and the next." Aurora's sapphire eyes twinkled as she spoke of helping Samantha gather all her thoughts together to put them into book form.

Samantha was sitting on top of the world, imagining her first novel hitting the bestseller charts, when a deep contralto voice knocked her back into reality.

"Does the fact that the two of them could have been seriously injured and not be around to tell this marvelous story ever enter your little mind, Aurora?" Kelley's steel-gray eyes narrowed on her partner's enthusiasm.

"Of course I was concerned about that, Kelley, but that's all after the fact, now, isn't it? They weren't mortally harmed, and in fact, it seems the entire motivation behind the visitation was to help get Alex out of that situation where she might have suffered more damage."

"There's no calming that vivid imagination of yours, Aurora, even for a second."

"You wouldn't know me if it were tamed; admit it," Aurora retorted. "Besides, why should it be? They're both fine, with only a few bruises and scrapes. Alex did more damage to her body in the first few years of martial-arts training than during the fall in the cave. She's just older now and doesn't heal as quickly."

"Thanks for talking about me like I'm an old woman, Mom." Alex leaned over the front seat and sent her mother a sarcastic glance. "And for acting like I'm not even in the car!"

"Alexis, I wasn't-"

"Sure you were, but that's okay." This time the smile was genuine. "I realize what an important revelation this is for you, and I'm doubly thrilled that Samantha is here to do most of the storytelling. I guess I'm still waiting for the I told you so."

"That's no way to talk to your mom, Alex," Al interjected with as solemn a look in Alex's direction as he could muster. "She has been telling you about past lives and the interactions of spirits with present incarnations since you could reason. It's not her fault you had to realize the hard way that she was right, again." His demeanor softened as he reached out and touched the ebony locks of his favorite relative. "I guess it's the way of the warrior, now isn't it, munchkin? You always have been hard-headed and in need of finding the truth for yourself. Now you know you truly were a warrior; I'm sure you've brought a lot of that young brave's essence through with you again this time."

"Well, we can all tell you've just returned from a spiritual journey. Out too long in the jungle with no one to talk to but the apes, Uncle Al?"

"Hey, don't start ragging on me, little miss. I'll have to pull this car over and . . ." The twinkle in the gray eyes was unmistakably jovial.

"Okay, okay, enough." Kelley interjected from the rear seat. "Samantha already knows we're a

bunch of kooks; this is just giving her more fuel."

Al pulled the car up close to the front door of the Center to let everyone out. Gary had offered to put everybody up for the next few days and told Kelley when she had phoned him earlier that he would leave the front door open until they arrived.

The lobby was empty save for the envelope with their names on it lying on the desk. After they managed to get the luggage inside, Kelley locked the front door, and the little entourage began their trek as quietly as possible to their rooms. They were all on the same floor and within shouting distance of each other.

Al suggested that they pile into his room and have a nightcap. Kelley squelched the idea and said she felt the girls had been out quite long enough for one day and needed to rest up if they wanted to venture out again in the morning. For once, she got no argument from either Aurora or Alex. Big Al pouted for a second or two but realized his little sister was right and agreed that he was just being selfish and wanted to spend all the time he possibly could with everyone before he had to leave.

They agreed to meet up for breakfast, and kisses were given all around at Alex and Samantha's door.

Alex gave Kelley a particularly affectionate embrace. She pulled the woman close with her good arm and whispered in her ear. "I just wanted to thank you and Mom for coming; it really means a lot to me."

"Alex, we've always told you we were never farther than a phone call away. You never doubted that, did you?"

"No, it's just that I felt like such a . . ."

"Kid?"

"Yeah, like maybe I was twelve again and locked myself out of the house."

"Honey, you'll always be twelve to us, even when your hair is as white as Uncle Al's."

The two women switched partners as Kelley and Samantha said their goodnights and Alex said goodnight to her mother.

Just as Alex was about to close the door, Kelley motioned her outside. "I'll be right there, Samantha," the brunette yelled across the room.

"Okay, I'm gonna start a bath."

"Is something wrong, Kelley?"



"Not exactly." The older woman looked intently at her daughter. "We saw how you kept looking at Samantha this evening, Alex, and we know what's been running through your mind."

Trying her damndest not to look like a child who had gotten her hand caught in the cookie jar, Alex knew precisely what her mom was talking about. "And? Don't tell me, let me guess--you all think I should continue to keep my big mouth shut and keep the family secret secret, right?"

"Actually, wrong! If there's ever going to be the right person in your life to confide in, we believe Samantha is the one. We just wanted you to know that we're all in agreement with you on this, Alex. We just wanted you to know that you can talk to her without worrying that we'll find out."

A sigh of relief escaped from the younger woman's lips and brought a smile to Kelley's face. The older woman could see the tension flow from her daughter's body.

Once again, Kelley reached out and embraced the younger version of herself. "I'm sorry we saddled you with so many secrets, honey; we just wanted your life to run as smoothly as possible."

"I know Kelley, and I love you and Mom for ..."

"We know, Alex. You'd better get inside; Samantha's waiting." Kelley turned and walked down the hall toward her own room.

Alex watched until Kelley disappeared into her room, then entered her own suite. She leaned back against the door and sighed. It felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders. She smiled to herself and slowly started toward the bathroom.

"You haven't used up all the bubbles, I hope," Alex chided, as she neared the bedroom door.

"What makes you think I put bubbles in the bath?" There was a watery echo to the question as it trickled through the half-open bathroom door.

"Number one, I know you, and number two, I can smell the scent of vanilla," Alex answered as she began to undress in the bedroom.

"What makes you think that's not just the candles you smell?"

"Is it?"

"Well . . ."

"I'm right, aren't I?" the brunette snickered. She finished taking off her clothes and headed for the bathroom.

"Yeah, you're right. But you had better hurry and get in here before the water gets cool; it doesn't

have a heater like ours at home."

Alex opened the door and drank in the vision of Samantha sitting in the swirling water, the glow from the candles flickering off her golden locks, casting an ethereal halo around the blonde head. The tall woman stopped and grinned. *My world was truly empty before you cast your magic on it, Samantha.* Again, the words of her mother echoed in her mind, *"Like everything else, Alex, when you're ready to accept it, love will find you."* *I must have been ready, Mom, because I can't imagine my world without Samantha.*

"Penny for your thoughts? You look like they're pretty deep."

"Nah, I was just thinking how lucky I was to have you."

"Ah." The smaller woman could not keep from smiling. She lowered her eyes and played with some of the bubbles. "So, naked lady, are you going to just stand there, tempting me to leave this warm liquid, or are you going to come join me?"

Without another word, Alex slowly stepped over to the Jacuzzi and lowered her statuesque form into the bubbles, seating herself on the opposite side of the tub from her lover.

Samantha let the water carry her over to her lover's side; she then lifted one of the goblets off the edge of the tub. "It was a lovely day, Alex, and here's to an even more lovely evening."

"It was a good day, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but you have some explaining to do, 'Little Al'." Samantha smiled and watched Alex cringe at her use of the ancient nickname. "Yes, you have some explaining about this mysterious uncle of yours who travels the world and appears like magic to come to your aid when you're in need. He appeared out of the blue, like a white knight on a winged steed." She giggled as she handed Alex the glass of wine she had poured before starting the bath. "How come I haven't heard of him before now?"

"Samantha, we're still getting to know each other; you can't expect me to have touched on all the facets of my life in these few short months."

"Why not? You know absolutely everything there is to know about me and my life."

"I doubt that I know everything," Alex countered. "I'm sure somewhere along the line we'll be having a conversation and something I don't already know will rear its ugly head. It will be at that point that I'll turn to you and say, 'Why, Samantha, you haven't told me everything!'"

The blonde laughed as she edged even closer to Alex and sipped on her wine. "Nope; I don't think so, at least not anything of any importance. And certainly nothing with an 'ugly head.' I led a rather dull life before hooking up with you Dorians."

"Well, then you'll just have to be patient with me, and I will eventually fill you in on all the lurid

details of my family life, okay?"

"Sure, you have the rest of this lifetime to fill me in, but you can start right now with good old Uncle Al."

"Okay," Alex agreed. She took another sip of her wine and put her good arm around Samantha, drawing the smaller woman close until their bodies were touching.

Samantha decided that the best position to listen to a story was on Alex's lap, so she continued to move until she was straddling the dark-haired beauty, and they were sitting face to face. "There, that's better, now I can really concentrate."

"Well that's good, because this is the kind of thing you need to concentrate on. As I said earlier, Uncle Al is the blackest of the Dorian sheep. He was the middle child and refused to be stunted by his place in the family. I guess we really haven't talked much about the Dorian side, but there is, of course, Kelley, who's the youngest, Uncle Al, and Uncle Darian-

"Darian Dorian, what an unusual name," Samantha interjected.

"It's a family name all the way around, and Uncle Al has made mention more than once that he was glad he didn't get saddled with it, as he believes the name made Uncle Darian an old stick in the mud."

"And were you named after Uncle Al?"

"Not really. We were both named after a great-great-great, like five or six times great grandmother, Alexis Llewellyn. I think Gram was working on having an Alexis when Uncle Al showed up instead. He laughs that he thinks he should have been me but there was a mix-up in the cosmos, and he came out instead. He's been trying to make it up to Gram ever since. But Gram really didn't care; she always felt that homosexuals had it all over the rest of the world anyway when it came to inspiration, artistic abilities, and flare. Of course, she was always a little prejudiced," Alex admitted.

"That's the most original reasoning behind being gay I've ever heard," Samantha laughed. "So, tell me something, Alex." Her smile faded slightly. "Why would your uncle have thought he was supposed to be you?"

"Because Gram was trying for a girl and because our birthdays are just two days apart."

"Well, why didn't she wait and call Kelley Alexis?"

"Kelley was a change-of-life baby; Gram hadn't planned on having any more kids. Besides, Kelley wasn't born in the right month."

"Oh, so the name Alexis has a special month?" Now the verdant eyes were spinning with questions. "Alex, this web is getting thicker and thicker as you weave it."

Alex took another sip of her wine and sighed, -something she seemed to be doing a lot of this evening. "What do you say we finish with this bath, reload these goblets, and I finish telling you the Dorian saga in the nice comfortable bed?"

"It's that long, huh?"

"Let's just say it has a few twists and turns."

"Deal."

Thoughts of seduction were put aside in anticipation of knowing more about Alex and her interesting family. Samantha's own family history paled in comparison to the stories Alex had to tell. The women finished washing up and dried quickly. Samantha insisted that she be the one to get the wine and told Alex to settle herself on the bed and wait. Alex was in no mood for confrontation and agreed, figuring she would have a few extra minutes to gather her thoughts and put the family dynamics into some semblance of order.

"Okay, Alex, I hope you're ready to talk because I'm certainly in the mood for listening." Samantha chuckled as she reentered the bedroom to find her lover propped up on pillows and waiting.

"I guess the best way to start is to go back to the beginning, at least to the beginning as I know it." Alex held out her glass and let Samantha fill it up, then took a sip and waited while the smaller woman climbed in bed beside her.

"The grandmother I spoke about--the one I'm named after--was a gold miner back in the 1800s, and she struck a mother lode. Sometime when we're home, I can go into more detail about her life, but the important thing about the two of us is that she was the one who started the Dorian dynasty."

"Wouldn't she have had to had all male children to start a dynasty?"

"Not really. The money is handed down through blood line, not necessarily the name."

"But you said the name was important . . ."

"I said the name Alexis Llewellyn was important, Samantha, not the Dorian part. But we're getting off the subject. It seems that one of my grandmothers got it into her head that most of the inheritance should go to a relative with the same name as our benefactor, then she further elaborated that the child needed to also have the same birth date. Whoever it was she had draw up the will made it ironclad, and no one has been able to break it to this day. The extra funds that had been set aside for this lucky distant relative were to increase in value until ten generations had passed. If, by that time, no female child had been born to stake the claim, then the monies would be put into a fund to help needy women. Up until my birth, it was very hard to exactly match a birthday. But my folks did the arithmetic, and Mom decided on a Cesarean birth so she

could pick the exact date. Needless to say, my Uncle Darian was less than thrilled when I came along to claim the bounty. By the time I was born, he had three sons but no daughters."

"And so you've received all the money?"

"Okay--no." She smiled at her lover. "The last of the stipulations is that I do not get the extra money until my 31st birthday, and I have to be single at that time. A woman after my own heart!"

"All right, but I'm still confused," Samantha said. "If this lawyer was so good at his job and this will with its prerequisites is so stringent, how can you get the money if it goes by blood line? I mean, I know you're a Dorian by birth, but Alex, don't you think they would have taken that into consideration at some point? If your relative had made sure of all the other provisions, I would think she would have insisted that the girl child be of the same blood line, also."

Samantha looked at Alex and watched in wonder as a light rose tint appeared on her lover's cheeks. She gave a questioning look and began to speak, but two long fingers silenced her voice. The taller woman shook her head and continued her explanation.

"I told you we were a bit of an eccentric family, Samantha. There's also an enormous amount of love between my parents--between all my parents."

A light went on in Samantha's head. She immediately realized what Alex was saying. It was no coincidence that Alex and Kelley looked so much alike-it wasn't environmental, it was biological.

"Uncle Al is your dad?" Samantha whispered.

"Yeah. It was kind of a rotten trick for the two of them to play on Uncle Darian. He thought with them both being gay that his kids would have a greater chance of getting the inheritance. But Uncle Al knew how much Kelley loved Mom. It was his way of allowing his little sis to actually be blood kin to her lover's baby."

"How beautifully romantic."

"It turned out to be more than just romantic for me."

"I'll say, including the fact that you ended up with three parents."

"Actually, no. After I was born, Uncle Al took off on one of his overseas adventures and was gone for the first five years of my life. He and my moms had an agreement that he would always be my Uncle Al, and I wasn't told that he was my father until I was old enough to understand all the implications. But he does spoil me, Samantha. He has since the day I was born. Even though he wasn't a part of my everyday life, he was always there in the background. The three musketeers were not going to inform anyone in the family as to what they had done, but when I was born they figured Grams had a right to know. Grams figured Uncle Darian did too, so he

wouldn't keep trying to have a daughter, at least not for all the wrong reasons."

"I'm sure he said that Kelley and Aurora and Al had you for all the wrong reasons."

"He tried, but no one really paid much attention to his paranoid ramblings. Grams knew the reason I had been conceived; fixing the date was merely a plus."

"So, Alex, exactly how much money are we talking about?"

Alex swallowed hard and continued, "Over the years, the money has been handled by an investment firm and a group of lawyers. Mom said she talked to one of the attorneys last year, and with all the stocks and bonds, and the real estate holdings, the accumulated total was a little over seventy million dollars, plus a 500-acre spread in northern California."

Samantha was so unprepared for the astronomical number that when she tried to swallow her last mouthful of wine, she ended up choking, with most of the red liquid spraying the taller woman's nightshirt.

"Oh, shit! I'm so sorry, Alex." She started to jump up from the bed but was caught by a strong right hand.

"Calm down, Samantha; it's okay."

"Damn, I knew you had money, Alex, but that's . . . that's . . ."

"Amoral--ludicrous--inconceivable?" The brunette pulled her lover close. "You'll never want for anything, Samantha."

"Alex, people are going to think I got with you for your money."

"But we know better." Alex kissed the smaller woman on the forehead. "We were destined to meet. Our little adventure out in the wilderness only further proved the fact that we were meant to be together."

Trying to take her mind off the family secret that she had just been made privy to, Samantha focused on the soiled nightshirt. "Take that off, and let me put it in some water to soak. I'll get you a clean one."

"It's fine, Samantha."

"No, come on, Alex; let me get the wine off of it before it stains."

Knowing that Samantha wouldn't be happy until the shirt was off, Alex let the blonde help her out of the soiled garment. Then she tried distracting her lover by pulling her close and nibbling on her neck.

"Stop that, Alex, you know you can't finish what you're trying to start." The blonde giggled softly as she pulled away ever so slightly, feeling the hardness of her lover's nipples against her own and unable to resist bending down and kissing one of the pink tips before sliding off the bed and walking into the bathroom.

"No fair getting me all excited and then leaving the room, you know." Alex mumbled. She glanced over on the nightstand and spied a piece of paper covered with Samantha's printing. "Is this the poem you were working on the other day?"

"Yeah," came the answer from the next room. "I was going to read it to you before you started talking about dynasties and ... rich people."

"Can I read it while you're playing Dorothy Domestic?"

"Sure."

Alex unfolded the sheet and began to read:

#### WHEN LIVES COLLIDE

Out of a primal and distant past, beyond the frame of time

An Indian maid and brave appeared to mingle souls divine.

The ancient emerged to those now here ~ they met on common ground.

Then with the help of mystical means, a healing way was found.

The present incarnations viewed reflections of long ago,

The essence of who they used to be, the new selves came to know.

A link with their eternal souls brought old and new together,

Then generations mingled in the moist Sedona weather.

A clap of thunder, a lightening bolt, Indian Summer rain ~

Hence, Shamanistic knowledge worked its spell on Earth again.

A final glimpse of who they'd been ~ then a poignant fare thee well.

Ancients left their modern selves with a fabulous tale to tell.

Now, I'll tell you all the story of the maiden and the brave,

Of love that brought their spirits back to an age-old, hidden cave.

Just because you have not seen them, don't negate this tale is true

For I talked with them as surely as I stand and talk to you.

My challenge now will be to let the world know natural truths

They taught me love surpasses time, those ancient Indian youths.

Though it may take me years to weave the tale for all to see,

The memory of the two of them will live inside of me.

"This is beautiful, Samantha." Alex was holding the poem in her hand when Samantha walked back into the room, carrying one of the still lit candles that had been stationed around the edge of the tub.

"It's okay. I'm not sure it's really finished yet."

"Sounds great to me."

"Yes," Samantha chortled, "but you're easy to please."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"No?"

"No."

With that, the blonde gently took the paper from her lover's hand and placed it back on the nightstand, along with the candle. She reached over and ran a small hand over Alex's chest, smiling as nipples that had gone back to their natural state again stood at attention at the gentleness of her caress. "See how easy you are?" she whispered into Alex's ear.

"We weren't talking about that," Alex whispered back.

"I was," Samantha said, leaning over to extinguish the candlelight. "I don't think I can wait until your body is totally healed to touch you."

"All this talk of money turn you on, Samantha?"

Evil flashed in emerald green eyes as Samantha pinched one of Alex's erect nipples.

"Ouch! That hurt!"



"It was meant to hurt. That statement was totally uncalled for!" the blonde retorted.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I thought I was being funny, but I wasn't."

"Apology accepted. Now . . . where was I before I was so rudely interrupted?"

"I think you were-"

Alex's statement was cut off as soft lips covered her own, allowing only the involuntary moans of pleasure to escape, while small hands began traveling down her body.

"On second thought, you don't need a clean shirt, and you don't need this underwear on either." With unexpected swiftness Samantha ran her hands down around Alex's hips and slid the panties down to the tall woman's ankles. She gently maneuvered them off the still swollen ankle, off the uninjured foot, and onto the floor.

"You might be a little slow tonight, but there's no reason for me to suffer withdrawal symptoms along with you." Starting at the ankles, the blonde nibbled her way up the long, sinewy legs of her lover.

Alex jumped slightly and let out a moan of delight when Samantha's lips buried themselves in the soft curls beneath her abdomen before her hands inched up the muscular thighs and her fingers eagerly found their way to part the moist nether lips beneath the dark ringlets.

"You taste sweet, my love," the blonde said as her tongue darted between the folds to lap contentedly on the nectar within. "I've got you in my clutches now, Alex. I have no intention of letting you go." She parted the lips again and languidly traced the opening from top to bottom, stopping ever so shortly at the pool of moistness before allowing her tongue to travel the length again. She could feel the bud of pleasure as it became harder, and the blonde grinned. She knew what Alex wanted, yet purposely avoided landing on the vulnerable spot until she knew the dark-haired beauty was ready to scream with desire.

"So, what is it that you want, my love? Tell me and I'll do your bidding." The angelic face glanced up from her perch to gaze on sparkling, half-lidded sapphire eyes; the brunette smiled down at her.

"Those are my lines," she half breathed.

"And how do they feel bouncing back into your ears?" Samantha whispered. "Doesn't matter, you need to answer, my love. What is it you want?"

"You know what I want, Samantha."

The blonde head swayed to and fro. "Nope, not good enough." She took one small finger and entered her lover slowly, watching Alex's abdomen tighten and her chest expand as her lungs filled with air. "This? Is this what you want?"

"Not yet."

"I didn't think so." Samantha removed her finger and replaced it again with her tongue. The bud was still swollen, and she knew Alex preferred to come on the outside before climaxing within.

"So, tell me, Alex; it's not difficult. Just let me know what to do and I'll do it." She ran her hands up the shapely sides of the taller woman, a sea of bumps following hands that reached up to engulf two firm breasts.

Hot breath blew on dark curls as Samantha continued to tease, unrelenting in her quest to receive a verbal answer.

"Please, Samantha." The plea came from lips moistened with desire.

"What, Alex?" She was not going to give in; she wanted to hear Alex beg.

"I ache for you, Samantha."

"For me to do what?"

"God damn it, Samantha."

The blonde kept teasing, placing her tongue on the eager bud only to move it slowly, causing an ache that would not be satisfied until a quick cadence was established and continued.

"Harder, Samantha. Faster."

"What?" Samantha was still not satisfied; she wanted to hear Alex ask.

"Samantha, lick me, hard, fast--please. Stop teasing."

With that, the tongue that had been reluctant to continue in one place found the spot that would take the brunette over the edge and focused on bringing the bud to bloom. Samantha continued in the same area until Alex's knuckles turned white and she begged for Samantha to get off the love-saturated area. It was at that point that Samantha once again entered her lover, but this time with a hard upward thrust, eliciting a moan of pleasure from Alex that caused the smaller woman's heart to pound faster.

Samantha situated herself between the muscular thighs. She enjoyed making love to Alex as much as she enjoyed being made love to, and it was no assumption that the old adage about giving being as great a gift as receiving was most assuredly a truth.

Alex, on the other hand, was not satisfied with being a passive participant. "Come here, you," she moaned as she stretched her right arm down to feel the moisture that trickled onto the blonde's inner thighs. She reached further and inserted two, then three fingers into the slick

wetness of her lover's treasure. "I want you to come at the same time I do, Samantha. It's better for me that way."

The smaller woman resituated so she could continue making love to Alex while being made love to in return. The buildup had been slow, but the anticipation heightened threefold with both of the women becoming involved in the lovemaking. During the heat of the moment, Alex forgot she had a wounded wrist and sore shoulder until an involuntary moan of agony instead of ecstasy escaped from her throat when she turned too quickly and grabbed at the smaller woman's waist.

Samantha started to stop, but was immediately threatened by a throaty utterance. Alex's dark locks were dripping with perspiration. She grunted, and then from deep within growled that if Samantha knew what was best she would not miss a beat, the pain be damned; it was worth the rapture.

Minutes passed and the two sated lovers lay quiet and content in each other's arms. Their breathing was no longer labored, and they found themselves bathed in the sweet after-sweat that allowed them to cool following the heat of inner explosions.

"It's been quite an interesting evening, my love," Samantha announced, breaking the silence and curling into her sleeping position on her lover's chest. "Are there still more secrets to be told of the Dorian tribe?"

"You've pretty much gotten an outline of all the major ones, that's for sure. Are you certain you want to remain in the family? You haven't taken the blood oath yet, so you could still escape."

"Could I really?"

"No! In actuality, you've been accepted and taken in; you now belong to us body and soul." Alex kissed the top of the still damp head and breathed in the odor of contentment. "I love you, Samantha."

"I believe my soul was intertwined with yours long before I even met you, Alexis Llewellyn Dorian--and I love you, too."

"Even though I'm going to be obscenely wealthy in a matter of months?"

"Aren't you already?"

"Well, yes, but . . ."

"So what's a few more million here or there?" Samantha giggled and squeezed Alex carefully, trying to remember that there were still some bruises on the body she loved to cuddle next to. "I suppose we'll just have a completely different set of problems from couples who have a lack of money. It doesn't mean our life is going to be without situations, I'm sure. They will just be different."

"I'm glad that's the way you think, my Destiny. The last thing I want is for money to be an obstacle in our relationship."

"So, do I have to sign a pre-nuptial agreement?"

"Samantha!"

"I'm serious."

Alex sighed deeply. She thought she had breathed the last of the sighs of exasperation when she began to tell the story of Al and the money. "Honey, I guess there are still some things we need to talk about, but not tonight, okay? I feel marvelous, and all I want to do is curl up with you and go to sleep."

"Sounds like a plan," Samantha agreed. "We don't need to go into the terms of the commitment until closer to the ceremony."

"Thanks, Samantha. One serious discussion and disclosure a night is sufficient." Placing her hand under the smaller woman's chin, she tilted the face she adored until she was staring into deep green eyes that radiated nothing but love. "Sweet dreams, my love," she whispered as she gently kissed Samantha's parted lips.

"Hmm," Samantha moaned and then answered with a countered, "Sweet dreams to you, too, Alex. See you in the morning."

Continued in Part 15...

## The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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### ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## **Part 15**

### **Chapter 15**

Sleeping late was a luxury Alex was beginning to enjoy, but a knock on the door brought her to the realization that vacation time was over.

"Alex," Kelley called. "Don't tell me you're still sleeping?"

After covering Samantha's exposed ear with her hand, the brunette responded with, "Just a minute, Kelley." She then attempted to carefully unwind her body from that of the small blonde.

"No sense trying to sneak out of bed, gimper," Samantha snickered, slowly opening her eyes. "And . . . don't think you're going to get away without a morning kiss." She sat up and planted a kiss firmly on her lover's lips.

"Honey, Kelley's waiting," Alex objected.

"I'm not going to seduce you, Alex; it was just a kiss." The blonde quickly rolled off the other side of the bed and hurried into the living room to open the door for Kelley.

"Hi, Samantha, I didn't expect you to answer the door."

"Ah," the younger woman smiled. "Did you expect me to sleep through the banging and yelling?"

"Actually, I thought Alex said you could sleep through an earthquake and not be fazed." Kelley kissed the blonde on the cheek and followed her into the dining area.

"Was a time," Samantha acknowledged. "But with the walking wounded in bed with me, I tend to wake up every time she groans or moves."

They were laughing when Alex hobbled into the room and sat down next to Kelley.

"So, what's so funny?" the brunette asked.

"Nothing, Alex. We were just talking about you," her mother answered.

"Oh, yeah, now that's funny," Alex commented sarcastically. "You teaching Samantha bad habits?"

"I wouldn't think of it." Kelley patted her daughter on the arm. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Aside from still limping on this stupid ankle, I'm feeling fine."

"Want some tea, Alex?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, please, that would be nice."

"Kelley, how about you?" the blonde asked.

"Got coffee?"

"Sure, I think I could drum some up, and I know I saw a coffee pot in one of the cupboards."

"Thanks, hon. I know Aurora and Al will be no good to anyone until they get their first cup."

The women heard a quick rap and the front door opening and closing. Al's friendly voice preceded him into the room. "Did I hear someone mention my name? I let myself in because I could hear you people all the way out in the hall; sounded like a party."

"Good morning, Uncle Al," Samantha's happy voice trailed in from the kitchen. "I'm making you guys a pot of coffee as you speak."

"That's my girl, Sam." He turned to Alex and smiled. "You got yourself a winner this time, munchkin."

"We all seem to agree on that," Kelley affirmed.

"Okay, okay, I'm blushing," Samantha interjected. "I can hear you, you know?"

"Yeah, but this way you continue to display your good side, while we keep showing our butts," Al laughed. He bypassed the table to see if Samantha needed any help. "What have you girls decided to do for breakfast?"

Kelley answered first. "We really haven't had a chance to discuss anything, Al. I just got here myself." She nodded in the direction of the younger women. "I had to practically bang the door down to get the sleepyheads up."

"No! Not my Alex," Al protested. "She always awakens with the dawn."

"Not lately," Alex confessed. "I guess some of Samantha's habits are rubbing off on me."

"See. I'm not completely faultless," Samantha chimed in.

"It's a little fault we can all live with, I'm sure." Al hugged the newest member of his family.

"Where are you off to this afternoon, Uncle Al?"

"Well, Alex, there's a new play opening on Broadway tomorrow night that I have tickets for and then some friends and I are traveling up to Vermont to witness a holy union. I tell you, that state is going to weigh down the East Coast with gays if things keep going like they are. It's becoming more popular than California."

"I don't think I would go quite that far, Al," Kelley said, laughing. "I do believe it would have to acquire more land to accomplish that feat."

"Yeah, but it certainly is popular," Al concluded. He turned to face his sister. "You gonna let Aurora sleep the day away, sis?"

"No!" Kelley answered, getting up and walking toward the door. "Since the coffee's brewing, I'll go get her. Are you girls going to get dressed, or are you going to stay in your nightshirts all day?"

"You did get us out of bed, remember?" Alex responded, a bit on the defensive. "And we're not quite ourselves when it comes to moving quickly, if you get my drift."

"We planned on dressing while you were off waking Mom up," Samantha added with a smile. "Uncle Al, can you get your own coffee when it stops brewing?"

"No problem," Al said. "I've got it covered out here."

"In that case, I'll go start the shower." Samantha picked up her mug of tea and headed for the bathroom.

When father and daughter were alone, Alex filled Al in on the conversation she had had with Samantha the evening before. Al hugged her and apologized for making her life so difficult, to which she smiled and said it was all very worthwhile; after all, she'd ended up with three loving parents and an outrageous inheritance.

"Honestly, Alex, Samantha seems like a wonderful person, and after the episode in the canyon, I would conclude that you really have found your soulmate. Do you know how lucky you are to have found her?"

"Yes, Uncle Al, I know. My attitude toward life has taken quite a turn since meeting Samantha.

The experience we went through the other day also solidified some of my old beliefs, ones I had lost faith in before Samantha came along to renew them."

"Well, I'm happy for you, honey. And I'm happy for Samantha. You're not the only lucky one, you know. Samantha's pretty fortunate to have found you, Alex."

"I'm not so sure I'd agree with you on that, but . . ."

"No buts, little lady, there are some things I won't be contradicted on and that happens to be one of them." He sat down next to her with the coffee he had just poured and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. "I know we don't see each other often, but you are my favorite girl, you know?"

"Seeing how there aren't all that many girls in your life, I will still take that as a compliment and say that you are one of my favorite boys. Now, maybe I should go join Samantha in getting dressed before Mom arrives and I get teased for being the only one left in my nightclothes."

"I imagine I can amuse myself until someone arrives to talk to me. Go on." He made a shooing movement with his hands, which reminded Alex of her friend, Sonny. She smiled inwardly as she made her way back into the bedroom.

Kelley and Aurora arrived before the younger women finished dressing, and Al informed them of the situation with Samantha. All of them had a bit of a guilt complex when it came to the restrictions they had placed on their daughter early on in her life. Personal constraints that had caused her to remain an enigma to her friends could certainly have been instrumental in her becoming a loner. They were all in agreement that it was good everything was out in the open with Samantha.

The remainder of the morning went quickly. Samantha was made to feel at ease with her new knowledge of the Dorian clan, and the topic changed to food and shopping. Al had to leave for New York before dusk, so that limited where they could go.

Kelley still insisted that they keep the walking to a minimum to avoid further damage to Alex's healing ankle. The trading post was open, but no one was around to help with the categorizing or naming of the plants Samantha had used to help Alex in the canyon.

Al never tired of talking, and Samantha fed his ego by asking tons of questions about his travels and escapades the world over.

There was so much for the young woman to learn about her new family, and she knew she couldn't fit it all into the course of a few days. Occasionally, she would find herself drifting off in thought to her own family and how they had basically disowned her. *That's not fair, Samantha. Mom didn't disown you and neither did Sally. The only culprit is Dad, and you knew how he would react. Nevertheless, it doesn't make not seeing them any easier.*

"Hey, half-pint, you okay?" Kelley's voice broke Samantha's reverie.



"Yeah, just daydreaming," the blonde said.

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Time for farewells came far too soon, but Uncle Al's plans were already made and couldn't be changed. The gentle man bent down and engulfed the small woman. "It was marvelous meeting you, Samantha. You take good care of Little Al for me," he whispered.

"I will; I promise," Samantha answered with a lump in her throat. "It was great meeting you, too, Uncle Al. I hope you don't remain a stranger."

"I'll try to get back to sunny California soon, little one." He released his hold on the blonde and said goodbye to his sister and sister-in-law, leaving his daughter for last. He rarely visited, but when he did it was always a special occasion.

"You really need to come see us at Alternative Paradise, Uncle Al," Alex whispered as she hugged the tall man's neck, "I've missed your face."

"I've missed you, too, Alexis. I told Samantha that California would be high on my list of places to visit soon. You take care of her; she's a find."

"I know," Alex smiled. "I will; you can count on it." Tears trickled from sapphire eyes as she watched Al disappear into the cockpit of the small jet.

She hugged Samantha close and sobbed, "He's really special, Samantha."

"I know, sweetheart. It was a nice surprise for you to see him."

Listening in on the conversation, Aurora interjected, "It certainly was. Kelley thought since he was back in the country he could spare a few hours for his family. He gave her no fight at all. He had just flown into Miami when she called him." She took out a hanky and wiped the faces of the two younger women. Alex smiled and caught her mother's hand.

"Just be careful, Samantha. As long as she doesn't go wetting this damn thing with spit to wipe the dirt off our faces, we're okay."

"Very funny, Alex," Aurora commented, "but there was many a time that kept you from having a smudge on your face for a picture."

"Okay, Mom . . ."

"Hey, I used to get the same treatment, Alex. It's a mother thing." Samantha giggled. "We'll just have to try to remember **not** to do it to our kid."

Receiving a look of disbelief from Aurora, Samantha quickly added, shaking her head fiercely and waving her hands, "No, not now . . . I was talking about in the future."

The look on Samantha's face had everyone in stitches, which was a nice relief from the tears of the goodbye. With a final glance at the jet as it left the tarmac, the four women returned to their vehicle and headed back to the Center.

The rest of the evening was nothing more than an extended gossip session; they discussed anything and everything, focusing quite often on Al and his eccentricities. Morning would bring packing and farewells. The women had invited Gary to dinner and lavished him with gratitude, which he quickly announced would be repaid tenfold when he visited California in the not too distant future.

The emotional roller-coaster they had all been on during the day left them unusually tired, and all four of the women found themselves in bed before the stroke of midnight.

"Sedona has been a life-changing experience in more ways than one," Samantha murmured.

"Yes, we both got a glimpse of our spiritual connection, and you became indoctrinated into the family by my final parent and the last of the Dorian secrets. Tomorrow we start back to civilization and the real world."

"I happen to like my world with you, Alex, and I'm getting secure enough to allow the real world to rear its ugly head and intrude occasionally." The blonde smiled and hugged her lover. "As beautiful as it is here, I miss home," she confessed.

"Me too," Alex agreed. "It's good to know we agree on that. Sweet dreams, my Destiny."

"Sweet dreams, Alex."

Curled up in the warmth and security of loving arms, Samantha almost immediately began to breathe the slow rhythmic cadence of sleep, and Alex could feel the smaller woman's mouth curl up in a smile as it rested against her chest.

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Sunlight streaked lazily into the room, dotting the walls with patches of gold. Alex opened her eyes in anticipation. Carefully she slipped from the bed, trying her best not to disturb the sleeping form that just seconds before had been clinging to her--but to no avail.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Samantha squinted, unaccustomed to the light in the room. "You're up early this morning."

"I don't want a repeat of yesterday; I'll probably never live it down as it is," Alex answered. "You don't have to get up just yet. I'm sure Mom isn't awake. I'm going to shower and dress after I put the tea on."

"No, why don't I go put the tea on, and you start the shower. I'll join you and we'll both be up and

dressed by the time Kelley comes calling."

"Are you sure, Samantha? It's terribly early."

"I got a good night's sleep," the blonde informed her lover. "Besides, showering with you is incentive enough to get my butt out of bed."

"Maybe here it is, but I have to drag you out of bed kicking and screaming at home."

"Ah, but that's the difference; we aren't at home." Samantha rolled off the bed and headed for the living room. "Go start the shower; I'll just be a sec."

The warm liquid streaming from the dual showerheads felt good as it flowed from both directions and cascaded into the middle of the oversized stall. About the time Alex had the water the perfect temperature, a naked body joined her, pressing close against her and planting a morning kiss on eagerly awaiting lips.

"I love the way you look when you're wet," the blonde professed, running her fingers through the ebony locks in front of her.

"I love the way you look when you're naked," Alex countered. "Wet or dry, it doesn't matter." She pulled the smaller woman close and nibbled on her ear. "The reason I was going to dress before you woke up was to avoid having to tell you that we don't have time for this."

"Time for what?" Samantha teased, caressing the brunette's buttocks.

"Samantha, the purpose of getting up was to be dressed by the time Kelley came knocking on the door. Do you intend for us to be in the bathroom when she comes calling this morning? That would be worse than yesterday."

"Sometimes you can be an unimaginative party pooper. Do you realize that, Alex?"

"Yes. I suppose you have a valid point there, but I would rather be considered a party pooper this morning than have Kelley teasing me the rest of the way home." Once again she bent down to kiss the full lips she loved. "Now, we really need to get washed and dressed."

"Okay," Samantha pouted. "I guess we can't have you losing face two days in a row."

Both women were showered, dressed, sitting in chairs, and drinking tea, with coffee brewing for the moms, when Kelley knocked gingerly on the door.

Voices in unison answered the knocking with, "It's open; come on in." Then the lovers looked at each other and giggled.

Surprised to see both the younger women up and dressed, Kelley's expression was one to be caught on camera. Her reaction only made the culprits smile even more.

"Aha! Thought you'd catch us sleeping again, didn't you?" Alex gleefully accused.

"To tell the truth, yes," Kelley confessed. "But this is a very nice surprise, and I do believe I even smell coffee."

"Absolutely," Samantha replied, "I'll get you a cup; go ahead and sit down."

As morning tends to do on the final day of a vacation, it disappeared into afternoon before anyone realized it. The Jeep was loaded, and the hour to leave was at hand.

"I hope it doesn't take me forever to get you people back here to visit again. Seems like I have to make a major purchase before I get any attention." Gary glanced sarcastically at Alex.

"My life has been going through some major alterations the past few months," the dark-haired beauty answered, motioning with her head to the back of the car.

"Great!" Samantha interjected. "Now I'm an alteration." She tapped both Gary and Alex on their heads.

"Oh, but such an exquisite modification you are," Gary insisted.

"No good kissing up now, the damage has been done. I've been spoken of as an object."

"Okay, kids," Aurora joined in the conversation. "If you can't play nicely together, I'm going to separate you."

"Actually, they are getting separated in a few minutes," Kelley added, pointing to the airport as it came into sight.

Their host pulled into the parking lot just as Samantha was listing all the good things that had come out of their visit to Sedona, including her meeting Gary.

Kelley went to check on their takeoff schedule and to see if the plane had been readied for them to board.

Finally, with goodbye hugs and kisses and more promises to keep in touch, the women were ready to leave Sedona. With conflicting emotions of joy and sorrow, the Californians boarded the plane headed back toward the Pacific Ocean and familiar territory.

While in the air, Aurora made a good case for having the girls at the villa for the weekend, and Samantha helped talk Alex into staying there until Sunday.

When they arrived in San Diego, Kelley insisted on driving the Porsche and told Alex and Samantha to ride with Aurora.

"I'm quite capable of driving, Kelley," Alex argued.

"Alexis, let Kelley drive your car home, no sense in taxing that ankle any more than necessary. You have the weekend to relax, and then no one will have any problem with letting you drive." Aurora smiled sweetly as she tried to smooth her daughter's ruffled feathers.

"You know, if I didn't know better, I would think that none of you have any confidence in my ability as a physical therapist. Don't you think I know when it's safe for me to drive?"

She received three definitive 'no' responses.

"Alex, no one has good judgement when it comes to doctoring themselves," Samantha said.

"Whatever," was the only comment the dark-haired beauty made before tossing Kelley the car keys and turning to walk toward her mother's vehicle.

"On second thought, why don't you ride with Kelley so she doesn't have to ride alone," Aurora suggested. "Besides, this way Samantha and I get to gossip a little more without being interrupted."

Alex grinned at her mother and shook her head. "You are a manipulator; you know that, don't you, Mom?"

"Why, Alex, what a lovely compliment," the older woman said.

The brunette gave Samantha a kiss on the forehead before letting her other parent know she would have company on the way home. "Don't believe **everything** she says about me," she warned her lover before getting into the Boxster.

"What makes you think **all** the talk is going to be about you?" Samantha questioned, smiling.

"Are we going to stop somewhere to eat?" Aurora yelled over to her mate.

"That would probably be a good idea. Why don't you two just follow us and be surprised."

"Okay," Aurora agreed.

Three hours later they were sitting on the balcony of the villa, drinking wine and discussing what they intended to do to occupy their time for the next few days. It was finally determined that they would spend most of the weekend simply relaxing.

Samantha was beginning to get excited that the Ellen DeGeneres concert was only a weekend away and reiterated the same to anyone who would listen.

Finally, Aurora and Kelley decided to call it a day. They said their goodnights and left the two younger women sitting by the pool.

"It's good to hear the ocean again," Samantha mumbled, almost to herself.

"Yes, it does become a bit addicting after a while, doesn't it? I can remember missing the sound when I would go on business trips. I finally bought one of those sound machines so I could get a decent night's sleep."

"You seemed to sleep all right in Sedona."

"I wasn't alone in a strange hotel room. Gary's place is familiar, and I had you with me. Hey, are you about ready to go to bed?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am," Samantha answered.

They each stole a final look at the ocean, and then got up and went inside. After getting into their nightshirts, they curled up together on the large bed in Alex's old room.

"Sedona was definitely an experience of a lifetime, Alex, thanks for taking me there."

"It was even more of an experience than I had anticipated, sweetheart, but you're definitely welcome," the dark-haired beauty said. Hugging Samantha tightly she continued, "I guess we found out that you really are my Destiny." She nuzzled her face in Samantha's hair and kissed her tenderly on the top of the head.

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The next three days seemed to evaporate into thin air. Rest and relaxation were of the highest priority, according to the moms, and both the younger women had to admit that the attention fawned upon them was not difficult to get used to. They mostly stayed in the villa, talked, and played board games. Alex hooked up Samantha's PlayStation to the largest of the television screens, and all four of the women had a marvelous time acting like children. They were all novices, but Alex and Samantha became fairly proficient gamers by the end of the weekend, especially after spending almost all of Saturday afternoon sitting in front of the television, competing with each other. Alex turned out to be champion of the action games, while Samantha preferred and could better manipulate the weird-looking creature who jumped from one brilliantly hued cube to another in constant fear of color-changing varmints.

Aurora made a large bowl of popcorn and Kelley made a pitcher of what she called frozen rainbows, which consisted of peach brandy, rainbow curacao, light rum, black raspberry liqueur, raspberry sherbet, frozen peaches, and ice. Sam had requested that they watch a pay-per-view movie, and the game room turned into a theatre for the evening.

Nestled together in bed at evening's end, Alex and Samantha discussed how much fun it had been to do absolutely nothing, something they rarely seemed to do anymore when at home. They decided that doing nothing would become a priority in their lives and they would spend at least one day a week doing just that. Then they laughed at the aspect of becoming more like the

moms, which gave Alex goosebumps.

"Damn, Samantha, don't tell me I'm becoming my mother!"

"Yeah, you're becoming Kelley, and I'm becoming Aurora."

Once more they found themselves giggling like schoolgirls until finally they both let out a deep sigh and went back to cuddling.

Sleep was not long in the offing and both of them were content to know that the following night at this time they would be in their own bed, looking out at their own stretch of beach, in the place they called home.

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Aurora was in the kitchen when Alex came stumbling in, still rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"I could hear you clanking around in here from the hall. I presumed it was Kelley. What are you doing up at this hour, Mom?"

"Actually, I was up about three hours ago. Inspiration, you know; it has total disregard for the human condition and our need for rest. I guess it was all the conversations with Samantha these past few days. My creative juices were flowing, and the longer I stayed in bed the more restless I became."

"Yeah, I can remember the odd hours you would keep when you were doing research or writing."

"I can't wait until she's ready to formulate her thoughts and put them down on paper, Alex. It's going to be fun helping a new writer get her feet wet in the business, especially one I'm so fond of."

"I'll bet." Alex kissed her mother good morning before continuing into the kitchen to prepare the teapot.

"Seriously, Alex, Samantha will have a best seller on her hands when she gets it down on paper."

"I know. I was pulling your chain, Mom. Samantha's lucky to have you to help her with her first book. It's not an easy business to get started in, and with your connections her book will get to all the right people. I appreciate your helping her."

"It's no chore. I love the subject matter, and I love Samantha. It will be good to see her accomplish something on her own . . ."

"Her own?" Alex questioned with a crooked grin and raised eyebrow.

"You have the Center, it was your dream to begin with. This will be the fruition of her dream--"

her book. I'm just here to give a helping hand."

Again the younger woman smiled broadly and kissed her mother on the cheek.

"We'll be back as soon as we get dressed, Mom. Are you staying up or going back to bed now that you exhausted your Muse for the time being?"

"What time do you girls plan on leaving today?"

"We're going to pack after we eat and then leave."

"In that case, I'll start breakfast and stay up; I can always nap later on in the day."

"Great; we'll see ya in a few minutes."

"Is Samantha up already?"

"No, but she will be when I get back to the room."

"Alex, why don't you sit down and have a cup of tea and let her wake up naturally?"

"Mom, if I waited for Samantha to wake up naturally, we'd be leaving after dinner," the brunette chuckled, but stopped walking toward the hall.

"Let her rest, Alex," Kelley agreed as she walked into the room.

"Goddess, she really has the two of you wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she?"

"Not any more than she has you." Kelley grinned at the younger woman.

"Touché," Alex acknowledged. She sat down at the kitchen table and waited for the tea to brew. "What's a few more hours?"

"Precisely." Aurora smiled and sat down to join her daughter and mate. "So, what do you want for breakfast?"

"I'd be willing to help Kelley with waffles, if she wants to take the time to make them," Alex volunteered.

"Well, why don't you ask her?" Kelley replied.

"I thought I just did."

"In a very roundabout way, but waffles it is as long as you're prepared to be the helper."

"Okay," Aurora interjected. "Now I know that breakfast is at least an hour in the making. By the



time you add the hash browns, the eggs and the 'meat,' I'll have plenty of time to take a nap. Wake me up the same time you do Samantha, okay?"

"Sure, Mom, go get some beauty rest."

Aurora chuckled and gave her two favorite people a shake of her head and a wave as she exited the room.

"All right," Kelley turned to her daughter and smiled. "Are you ready to help prepare a breakfast feast?"

"You betcha!"

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Had the cooks presumed that the fragrant aroma of the meal would waft through the corridors and tickle the senses of the sleeping beauties, they would have been waiting until everything was cold before eating. Instead of letting nature take its course, Alex got to be the one to go wake her mom and Samantha.

The hours between breakfast and leaving disappeared almost as quickly as the rest of the weekend had. Alex and Samantha were anxious to get on their way, and the two older women, even though they hated to say goodbye, knew the feeling of wanting to get home. As much as Aurora wanted the villa to always be Alex's home, she knew that their daughter had finally found a *home* to call her own. It was a bittersweet realization, but Aurora was happy with it because Samantha was like a second daughter to her and the best partner she and Kelley could have ever imagined for their Alex.

There was a short discussion . . . as to which one of them should drive, then Alex climbed in behind the wheel and Samantha settled herself on the passenger side.

"You have a very stubborn daughter, Mom; do you realize that?" Sparkling green eyes stared up into Aurora's face.

"Yes, and I lived with her for seventeen years. Your ordeal is just beginning." The older woman bent down and gave Samantha a kiss goodbye. "Make sure she stays somewhere near the speed limit; there's nothing wrong with her accelerator foot." She stood and smiled at her daughter. "When will we see the two of you again?"

"Mom, we haven't even left yet and already you want a date for the next visit?"

"If I don't ask now . . ."

"Probably not until after Halloween, unless the two of you decide to join us up in San Francisco?"

"I don't think so," Kelley informed Alex. "I have something else planned for that date." She looked at her lover and smiled. "And I guess now you'll just have to experience the sensation of anticipation, because I'm not going to tell you about it right now."

Alex beamed at the exasperated look that came over her mother's face. "Hey, you know the wait will be worth the experience."

Aurora broke down and smiled, nodding her head in agreement.

"Okay then, can I plan on you two being here for Thanksgiving?"

"Do you need your answer immediately?" Alex asked.

A small hand reached over and patted the brunette on the knee. "We can say yes, can't we, Alex? Thanksgiving should be spent with family." Her green eyes twinkled when Alex nodded in agreement. Samantha smiled and turned to Aurora. "We'll be here, Mom; thanks for asking us."

"It's a standing invitation, sweetie. Now, you two had best get going before I try to talk you into staying for dinner."

"No way," Alex replied with a chuckle. She turned the key and started the engine. "I want to be rested for the onslaught of unanswered messages tomorrow morning."

"Be sure to remember to call us when you get home." Kelley reiterated the statement that Alex had heard from her mom as a farewell for as long as she could remember.

Alex's last words as she maneuvered the car away from her parents were, "We will--well, I'm sure Samantha will remember. We love you both."

A smile and a tear shared Aurora's face as she watched her daughter's car disappear down the drive. Kelley stood by her side and placed an arm around her shoulder. "We wanted to see her settled and happy, honey. She is; we have to be thankful for that. Besides, now that she's with Samantha, we'll probably see more of her."

"I know; it's just that I miss her the moment she leaves the driveway."

"We should be glad that Sam is so family oriented. Who knows, Aurora, you might even get that grandchild you've been bellyaching about for years."

That definitely brought a smile to Aurora's face. She turned and hugged her lifemate. "Even after all these years, you still know exactly what to say to cheer me up."

"It's **because** of all the years that I know what to say, my darling." Kelley drew her lover close and kissed her on the crown of her head, taking in the sweet smell of Aurora's perfume. "Shall we go inside? The children are gone and we have the house to ourselves." Her smile increased when she heard Aurora giggle, and the two turned and walked slowly back into the villa.

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They slowly rounded the corner that brought Alternative Paradise into view.

"Wow, is it just me or are you getting the same feeling I am? Nothing looks better than the familiar surroundings of home. I feel like we've been away for months," Samantha exclaimed as they pulled into the garage.

"It does feel good to be home, and from the looks of the outside, all is well. Kim said she would probably be gone by the time we got back. She had some personal errands to run this weekend."

"So, we have the place to ourselves."

"Yep, just us and Rainbow."

"Gods, I can't wait to see that little furball; I'll bet she's grown while we've been gone."

"I'm sure she has. Let's not worry about the luggage, I'll get it in the morning."

Samantha found Rainbow curled up in a ball sound asleep on the couch. She picked the kitten up and noticed that she had, indeed, grown some. Holding the soft fur-baby in her arms, she walked to the window and looked out at the ocean. *It is definitely good to be home. I don't think I appreciate any view as much as the one I'm looking at right this very minute.*

Strong fingers gently kneaded Samantha's shoulders that were tight from sitting in the car. Alex leaned down and kissed the nape of Samantha's neck. "One of the best things about being home is having you here with me and all to myself." She ruffled the kitten's fur as a greeting, "Well, almost all to myself."

Samantha giggled and put the kitten down on the floor before turning around and facing her partner. "I love the way I feel when I'm in this room with you; it's as though nothing and no one else matters. My world is complete when I'm here by your side." She threw her arms around Alex's waist and held her tight.

"I don't know about you, but I'm kind of tired after that drive." Eyes matching the color of the afternoon sky stared down into green pools of desire.

"You know, I could use an afternoon nap myself."

Even though it was definitely not their intention, the two lovers found themselves fast asleep before they could put into action the real reason they had headed for the bedroom. The drive up from La Jolla and the comfort of being home had relaxed them more than either of them had realized.

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Alex had to blink twice to remember where she was, and when her eyes finally focused, the darkness of the room was quite a surprise. *This was not at all what I had in mind when I suggested a nap. I didn't really want a **nap!***

"Samantha." She nudged the sleeping beauty in her arms. "If you sleep much longer now, you won't be able to get to sleep when it really is bedtime."

"Sleep? I didn't want to go to sleep."

"I guess your body did."

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"For what? I fell asleep, too. I just woke up sooner." She squeezed the smaller woman and kissed her on the crown of her head. "You hungry?"

"Yeah, but I don't really feel like going out to eat."

"We could order in," Alex suggested.

"Pizza?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Great!"

"Okay, pizza it is. Hey, everyone would be happy with the way we are recuperating. We're staying at home like two old married people, napping in the afternoon, and ordering dinner from the nearest pizzeria."

"That's scary," Samantha giggled and gently pushed Alex out of bed. "Better order that pizza before we're too old to eat it."

They allowed the remainder of the evening to unfold slowly and uneventfully. The next day would begin a new week and with it came the realization that it was back to a schedule and back to work.

Alex vowed to begin looking for a full-time therapist who could take over most of her duties, and she talked to Samantha about hiring an assistant that she could train to take her place when they were either away or when being an author took up more of her time.

Alex had proved to herself that she could make her dream clinic come to fruition. But now that she had Samantha to share her life, she didn't want to be tied down to a business that required her undivided attention. She planned on starting with long weekends, and then she wanted to unhurriedly show her lover the world. Past trips came to mind when she thought of the places she

most wanted to share with Samantha, including many of the romantic, out-of-the-way cities in Europe and, of course, Samantha's dream voyage to Greece.

Kelley had talked of permanent retirement within the next year, and Alex thought it might be nice for the four of them to take a cruise together. She put the thought on the back burner as she watched her lover sitting by the window writing in her journal. It was quiet and serene, and the woman who had thought she would never find peace in the world was finally surrounded by it.

"What are you writing?"

"Just a poem."

"Is it finished?"

The blonde sighed and turned from the window. "It's finished, Alex, but it's rather long. It's one of those form poems, the kind people who don't like to write poetry hated in school. It's called a sestina and it may seem a little redundant at times, but that's the nature of the beast, so to speak." She looked up into adoring blue eyes and continued, "It's kind of the story of how I felt before I met you and how I feel now. I really had no control over the form; the words have to be used over and over again . . ."

"Stop making excuses for it, Samantha." Alex grinned and reached for the journal. "Are you going to read it to me or should I read it for myself?"

Cheeks that were pale moments ago began to take on a hint of rose. "I'm not that good at reading my own words out loud, but I will if you want to hear it."

"Of course I want to hear it."

"Okay, sit here beside me. It's entitled . . ."

### A Sestina for Alex

Before you entered my life, Alex, my world was flat, dismal, and empty.

It was a one-dimensional landscape where I simply existed.

The main element that should abound in each life was sorely missing.

You have opened my mind to endless possibilities and filled my heart.

Because of you, my world is now a miraculous place, my heart complete.

You have filled my existence with the one thing it was lacking ~  
your love.

I remember back to that day not long ago when I knew not love.

I would walk along a beautiful beach and feel utterly empty.

My life held only the shadow of a smile, for I was incomplete.

Sadder yet was the fact that I didn't even know you existed.

I thank the gods for the day you came along and slipped into my  
heart.

You instantly filled that hole in my soul where your love had  
been missing.

Falling in love made me realize that other things had been  
missing.

I had been blind to their existence, for they couldn't thrive; there  
was no love.

All you need do is walk into a room to speed up the beat of my  
heart,

And the way you look into my eyes can make a full room seem  
empty.

When you're around, I feel as if my old world never really  
existed.

You are my universe, the other half of my soul; you make me  
complete.

I can only hope that I do the same for you and make you feel  
complete.

I no longer walk through life, searching for a piece of me that is  
missing.

In having found you, I feel as though the Me before never  
existed.

I am full of life, as we begin to discover each other through love.

No longer must I walk through life alone and be made to feel empty.

My days are now filled with sunshine, because I carry you in my heart.

It's an oddity and mystery, that small organ we call the human heart.

It keeps us alive as it faithfully beats, but we still do not feel complete,

Until another heart beats in unison ~ without it we feel empty.

Before you, I never questioned why, but I knew something was missing.

Now I know it was that intangible magical illusion we call love.

Once found, it's difficult to believe that before love we really existed.

I know cynics would argue that of course before you, I existed.

And the intelligent part of me would agree with them, but not my heart.

That part of me knows better, I was unfinished until I found you and love.

But once you and I found each other we both were made totally complete.

Alex, my soulmate, you are the inexplicable magic that was missing.

Now you are here and our souls are joined, neither of us need ever feel empty.

We merely existed before we met; a place in each of us was empty.

Our souls remembered that we could meld and become the essence of total love.

Now we are complete and need not stumble through life with part of our soul missing.

Tear-misted sapphire eyes looked at the blonde in awe. "Such a gift you have, Samantha. I'm glad you decided to share that with me . . . write it about us. I feel the same way; I just don't have the ability to take the words and turn them into a concert for the heart like you do. It's beautiful. Thank you." Alex reached over and drew Samantha into her arms.

"I was afraid you would think it was silly, old fashioned, or just plain boring," Samantha said.

"You have another think coming, if that's how you feel. I love to hear your poetry or anything else that you decide to pen. Remember, I grew up listening to the first draft of many a book and poem, too."

Early evening had finally turned late; the sky was peppered with pinpoints of white light, and a soft haze surrounded the moon.

After they had arrived home, the day seemed to have taken on an almost mesmerizing disposition of relaxation, like no day they had ever spent together. Now, it was once again time to sleep, and ironically, they were both ready for it. Cuddled in their own bed for the first time in weeks, the two lovers felt safe and secure in each other's arms.

"I guess this is the official end of your birthday celebration, Samantha."

The blonde chuckled into her mate's chest. "Gods, Alex, I guess you're right. I've never had a birthday celebration last two weeks before."

"We'll see if we can make it last even longer next year," Alex stated.

"Longer than two weeks?"

"Sure."

"Okay," Samantha answered with a broad grin. "But do you think we could leave out the part where we fall through the floor of a cave?"

"Most definitely, my Destiny, most definitely."

"In that case, I'll be looking forward to getting another year older. Of course before we come back around to my birthday, I do believe there is a very special birthday occurring in February."

"Right you are, a very special day it will be, indeed. So . . . why don't you close those pretty little eyes of yours and dream of ways to spend money."



"Alex, what **am** I going to do with you?" Samantha shook her head and giggled.

"You are going to help me make it to my rocking chair, so you had better get used to having me around."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Goodnight, Samantha. We've got a busy day tomorrow; see ya in dreamland."

Concluded in Part 16.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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**Part 16**

## Chapter 16

Odd as it might seem, sleeping in her own bed reinstated old habits, and Alex once again found herself waking up with the first light of dawn. Conversely, Samantha found the comfort of home reversed her propensity to awaken at Alex's slightest move. Alex realized this as she slipped out from under the smaller woman's grasp and inched off the bed.

The day would definitely be a busy one, and she wanted to get started as soon as possible. Rainbow followed her into the kitchen, and she gave the small creature a saucer of milk before pouring herself some tea. Alex's business persona had reminded her last evening that she would need to check her e-mail in the morning, so she had gone down to the car and retrieved the laptop. The computer now sat vacantly staring at her, a physical reminder that it was time to return to work.

During their absence from the office, her contact with Kim had been through online messages and phone calls. Luckily, there hadn't been any major problems in the two weeks they were vacationing, and most of the inquiries were easily handled via the Internet. The brunette loved living in the information age, and now having the ability to be an absentee boss was more important than it had ever been before. She shivered at the thought of the stack of telephone messages awaited her arrival in the office later this morning, but she wasn't quite ready to tackle them right now.

On the way home, she and Samantha had again discussed having Sally come visit and the remote possibility of Samantha's mom joining her. Alex knew that nothing would make her lover happier than to see her mom and sister at the same time, but it was doubtful that the elder Riley would be making a visit to Laguna in the near future, unless things at home continued to worsen. Alex had mixed feelings when thoughts of the Rileys came to mind. She desperately wanted Samantha to have the approval of her entire family, but the brunette had been dealing with the patriarch far too long to hold on to any fairy-tale hope of a happy ending where he was concerned. It seemed he ran his family like he ran his salespeople, with control and fear, throwing crumbs of encouragement and rewards when the spirit moved him. She had disliked Don Riley an eternity before she had ever met him in the flesh, and after the way he had treated Samantha, she downright loathed the man. The only reason she had not pursued annihilating him in business was that it would also devastate Samantha and the rest of her family.

Shaking off the queasy feeling that was building in her stomach from thoughts of the confrontation between father and daughter, Alex turned her thoughts to pleasant things, namely, Samantha. She would give the sleeper another hour, and then their vacation would definitely be ended. The brunette spent the next 45 minutes hooking up Samantha's video game, petting Rainbow, and answering e-mail.

The sun had peeked over the building and was filtering playfully into the living room when she decided it was time to awaken the blonde and get ready to greet the workday.

Surprisingly, the anticipated chore did not turn out as Alex had expected. With two cups of tea in hand, she walked through the bedroom door, only to find Samantha sitting on the side of the bed,

her sparkling emerald eyes actually open and a large grin upon her face after she caught a glimpse of Alex's expression.

"See, I can greet the day without having to be dragged kicking and screaming from the security of our bed." Samantha reached out and relieved her partner of one of the cups. "Thanks, Alex, this is just what I need." She took a large sip and sighed. "Guess it's time to put our noses back on that grindstone."

"For the time being, yes. But we're going to start working on finding you an assistant; someone to eventually take your place when you're too busy with your writing to be bothered with Alternative Paradise."

"I love working with you, Alex, but you know the prospect of having writing turn into a career would be a dream come true." Samantha put her tea down and motioned for Alex to sit by her on the bed. "In the meantime, I would like to still keep working in the clinic, so at least I feel useful. I'm pretty sure you concocted my current position out of your own necessity." The smaller woman grinned when Alex did not even attempt to deny the fact. "But I think it's become a fairly viable post, and it gives me a sense of pride to know I can coordinate a clinic the size of ours."

"I'm not trying to push you out of the Center, Samantha. I just want to give you the opportunity to pursue your writing as well as to delve deeper into the area of healing like we discussed on the trip home."

"I want to do all of that, Alex. And I want to do the traveling that we talked about, but things are happening so quickly; it's hard to assimilate them all. In actuality, having the Center is keeping me grounded in the real world."

"There are just so many places I want to take you . . . so much for us to experience . . ."

"Alex, we'll have the time." Samantha placed a hand on the brunette's shoulder. "Why don't we pretend that we need the money and the jobs and keep building this center until it's everything you envisioned? While we're doing that, we can search for a physical therapist to come in only when needed, like when we go on vacation. I'll train someone to do the same for my position." She kissed Alex on the cheek. "I love the way you want to spoil me, honey, but I think you'll be unhappy if you don't make this center everything you wanted it to be before I came along and interrupted your life."

"I wouldn't call you an interruption." Alex chuckled and then continued, "Nothing like the artist giving the business woman the practical side of life." She drew the blonde woman into her arms. "I want you to be happy, Samantha. I have all the means at my disposal to make your every wish come true."

"The thing that makes me happiest is being beside you, Alex. I didn't realize you were as wealthy as you are when I fell in love with you, you know?"

Sapphire eyes glistened as the dark-haired beauty listened to words that further gladdened an

already overflowing heart.

"Sure," Samantha confessed, "I knew you had money or at least backers who had money. But I had no idea of your total worth. It wasn't your money I fell in love with, Alex; it was you."

"I think I get the picture." The dark-haired beauty beamed at her mate. "We'll take the playing slowly. You'll write as the muse allows, and like Mom suggested, we'll both study Reiki. We'll take things easy and see what the fates have in store for us."

"Sounds like a marvelous life plan," Samantha agreed.

"Well, if that's the case, then it's time for you to get your butt out of bed and back into your routine of businesswoman. It is Monday morning, you know?"

After a shower and a quick breakfast the two women made their presence known downstairs. Every employee they came into contact with welcomed them home, and they were soon back into the natural swing of the Center's operation. Alex had a meeting with Kim in her office, and Samantha went to check on her scheduling for the upcoming week of lectures and guest instructors.

They had promised to meet for lunch in the apartment, but at 11:30 Alex called Samantha's office to let her know there was going to be an emergency meeting in the conference room. Samantha couldn't imagine what would have instigated the stat meeting, but she dropped what she was doing and headed for the second floor.

She arrived at the large room and was greeted by one of the employees who graciously opened the double doors and motioned for her to enter ahead of him.

"S-u-r-p-r-i-s-e!"

The word did exactly that as she looked and saw all the employees who were not working with clients standing beneath a large sign that read: Happy Belated Birthday, Samantha!

She could feel the heat as color rose in her cheeks, and her eyes filled with tears. Alex was there by her side with a comforting arm around her shoulders. "Nothing like stretching your special day out over three weeks," her lover whispered into her ear.

"I don't know what to say!" The blonde looked around the room and mouthed "thank you" to everyone there.

"Well, don't just stand there," Angel commented as she motioned for Samantha to come further into the room. "We have a spread here, a cake to cut, and presents. Of course, we only have our lunch hour, so time is short."

Samantha walked over to Angel and gave her a hug, "Thanks. This is such a surprise!"

"Hey, we couldn't let your special day go by without celebrating it. But we did have this planned for last week," the dark-haired woman smiled. "We had to make up an excuse to eat the first cake."

"I'll bet that wasn't hard," Samantha replied. "Probably something like--the boss is staying away another week," she smiled at her friend.

Now it was Angel's turn to feign embarrassment.

It didn't take long for the food to begin to disappear, and Samantha insisted on cutting the cake before opening the presents so those who had to leave could take some with them. She opened the gifts according to who had to leave first and saved Kim's and Angel's for last.

Kim's gift was tickets to a dinner-theatre show in Los Angeles; they were open-ended tickets so they could pick any show in the coming season. "I figured you might want to do some sightseeing sometime in the near future, and it would be a nice way to spend the evening afterward."

"These are marvelous, Kim, thank you!" Samantha turned to Alex and smiled. "Now we have another reason to visit LA."

"I guess so," the brunette responded. "We'll see what shows they're planning to do this season, and you can pick the date." She smiled over at her old friend and mouthed a "thank you," to which Kim mouthed back "you're welcome" before giving Samantha a hug and begging off to attend to a client.

Finally, the only present left was Angel's. Samantha was sure by its shape that it was a music CD but was pleasantly surprised when it turned out to be another video game. "This looks interesting," she commented as she turned the case over in the hand. "What kind of a game is this, exactly?"

"You're kidding me, right?" Angel came closer and took the jewel case out of Samantha's hands. "You're not telling me that you don't know who **this** is?" Angel pointed to the image on the front of the case.

A blank expression crossed the face of the small blonde. She looked at her friend in amazement. "I'm afraid I am. Who is it?"

"It's only the star of the most popular syndicated series on television. You really mean to tell me that the two of you don't watch television?"

"Not much," Samantha blushed. "We've been rather preoccupied lately."

"Oh, yeah," Angel acknowledged. "I forgot the two of you were still in the sheet-burn stage."

Now Samantha was really blushing. She wanted desperately to change the topic of conversation.

"So," she asked, "who's Xena?"

"Listen, we don't have time to go into who she is right now, Sam. Just try to catch it on television one of these nights, okay? It's a great show; I'll fill you in on the details later! In the meantime, enjoy the game. I hate to eat and run, but I have a client arriving in five minutes. Happy belated birthday." Angel gave the blonde a kiss on the cheek and hurried out the door.

"Okay, now I'm really confused," Samantha confessed as she looked up at Alex and got no help whatsoever.

"Hey, I don't know anymore than you do. Guess we'll have to find this show and watch it sometime, especially if it's a big enough hit to warrant a video game being named after it."

Neither Samantha nor Alex had taken time to eat while the room was filled with employees, but now with it empty, they sat down to the plates someone had been kind enough to fill for them.

"So, how's it going--being back at work?" Alex asked while she pushed her salad around the plate with her fork.

"It's been quite a busy morning. We have some new speakers coming in next week, so I'm glad we got back in time for me to schedule them in. We also have a Reiki instructor penciled in for the first week in November. I'm really looking forward to that lecture. I'm glad I still have time to read the book Mom gave me and hope to do a little studying on the subject beforehand." The blonde watched as Alex continued to push her food around her plate and knew that something was weighing on her partner's mind. "How did your morning go, Alex?"

"Most of it went great, until I had a meeting with Kim."

"And . . .?"

"It seems there is a bit of a problem with Angel." Alex saw the look on Samantha's face and the way the blonde started to shake her head.

"I don't think it's anything either of us could have foreseen," Alex continued. "Kim thinks she has a drinking problem."

"Why? What makes her think that?"

"There've been complaints from a few of the late afternoon clients that she smelled of alcohol, and one client mentioned that she had slurred speech during one of his visits."

"No one mentioned any untoward advances, did they?" Samantha asked, hoping to receive a negative response.

"No, but I don't know if I want to take the chance that she might," Alex confessed. "We're much too new a center to have problems with employees making passes at clients or being inebriated

on the job." The brunette shook her head and got up from the table to stare out at the ocean. "I like Angel, and she's a damn good therapist. I'd like to try to talk to her and get her help before taking any disciplinary action." She turned around and looked at Samantha. "What do you think we should do?"

The blonde got up and stood next to her partner. "I've had my outs with Angel, but if she has an addiction problem, and if she's willing to work on it, then I think we ought to help her. The trick is going to be approaching her."

"I know, and I don't relish that in the least. I suppose we could watch her closely for the next few weeks. Now that we're aware of the situation, we could take action as soon as one of us, or Kim for that matter, observes that she is under the influence during business hours. I guess we could wait that long."

"That sounds like a marvelous plan, Alex," Samantha agreed. "That way we're not jumping onto her for something we weren't around to personally observe. I just hope we can get it under control before we take off for another vacation."

"I'm sorry to ruin your party atmosphere with this discussion, honey," Alex stated, putting her arms around the smaller woman's shoulders.

"Don't be silly. This is important. My birthday has lasted longer than any birthday has a right to, and this lunch today came as a complete surprise."

"Hey, to get on a lighter subject, did you get a chance to call your sister this morning?"

Green eyes beamed up into sapphire ones. "As a matter of fact, yes, but just for a short period of time. She had to go to work, and she made me promise to call later this evening and fill her in on our trip. I'm not exactly sure how to explain the visitation. I may leave most of that until I see her in person. It'll be easier to talk with her about it face to face, I'm sure."

"As much as I hate to say this," Alex began, "I have a conference call in about ten minutes with a new doctor who wants to send us patients."

"It's still a work day." Samantha gave her lover a goodbye kiss. "I'll put what's left of the perishables away before I leave here. See ya in a couple of hours."

Alex gave her a hug, and then reluctantly withdrew her arms. "Yeah, 'til then. See you in a bit. Don't work too hard."

"You either," Samantha countered, before giving Alex the shooing motion with her hands, encouraging her to leave. "Go . . . time to go back to work . . . boss lady." She blew Alex a kiss when she reached the door and watched as she walked into the hall.

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful, as were the evening and the remainder of the week. It didn't take them long to get back into the swing of work. In the evenings, Samantha made sure

they spent some time going over the book Aurora had given them on Reiki. They would position the large pillows on the floor and sit by the windows, overlooking the ocean. Sam would read, sometimes to herself and sometimes out loud. Growing up with Aurora, Alex already knew all about the chakras and their colors and functions. Samantha found the new material fascinating and had Alex test her on her knowledge after she finished each chapter in the book.

Marcy called on Wednesday evening, and during her conversation with Alex it was decided that she and Von would come up on Thursday night, so everyone could be rested on Friday morning. Alex suggested that they spend Friday and Saturday evening in the City of Angels and take in a bit of sightseeing on Saturday. The plan was to arrive in the LA area in time to check into the hotel before the show and then to have a late dinner afterward. Normally it would be a three-hour drive from Laguna, but because they were leaving on a Friday, they added an extra hour to compensate for weekend traffic and another to take care of any unforeseen situation that might occur along the way. Alex and Marcy knew how stressful it could be driving in the bumper-to-bumper traffic that surrounded the city, and noon became the planned time of departure.

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Marcy and Von arrived close to 11:00 on Thursday evening. Samantha had everything packed and the suitcase sitting in the living room long before they showed up. Marcy hadn't informed Alex that she had just purchased a car and surprised her friend by arriving in a brand new Suburban, totally equipped with the VCR and television that Alex had envisioned for the one she was thinking about buying.

"I figured there was no way the four of us were going to fit into either that Porsche of yours or Samantha's VW. This way we can all ride in style."

"But I'm used to doing the driving," Alex grumbled as she congratulated her friend on the new vehicle and gave it a thorough inspection. "Don't suppose you'd let me drive part of the way to Hollywood?"

Keeping a somber face, Marcy teased Alex as only an old friend could. When she finally let a smile break through the façade, Alex knew they would be sharing the task of driving. But Marcy let it be known that she wanted to be behind the wheel when they entered Hollywood.

They called it an early night, and everyone was in bed before the stroke of midnight in anticipation of a weekend full of activity.

"I feel a little guilty about taking off tomorrow," Samantha confessed as she snuggled close to her lover. "We've been back less than a week."

"Do you have all the lecturers and instructors scheduled for next week?" Alex asked.

"Yeah."

"Then there's no reason we can't take the day off. I got caught up on everything I had scheduled,



too. We have people to cover the Center; that's why we hired them." Alex kissed Samantha on the head and held her tightly. "Now, close those pretty eyes of yours and dream of the city of the stars. Tomorrow at this time you'll be in Hollywood."

Samantha did exactly what she was told, and the next thing she knew Alex was shaking her gently to wake her up.

"Come on, sleepyhead, time for breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Samantha mumbled. She turned over in bed and placed the pillow over her head.

"Breakfast, Samantha. Breakfast and Hollywood, remember?"

"Hollywood!" The blonde rolled back around and rubbed her eyes. "It's morning already!" She bolted upright in the bed, rubbing her eyes to assist the wake-up process. "We're going to see Ellen tonight!"

"By George, I think she's got it," Alex laughed at the still half-asleep woman who was trying to shake the cobwebs from her head.

"But you said breakfast, and I don't smell a thing," Samantha replied, sniffing the air.

"I said breakfast; that doesn't necessarily mean I've cooked it, silly."

"Hmm, point taken," Samantha agreed.

Alex watched Samantha scoot off the bed and stumble into the bathroom. "As soon as you've showered and dressed, we can leave and go get something to eat before we start the long drive."

"Is everyone else awake and dressed?" Samantha wanted to know.

"Marcy's up, but Von is more inclined to sleep late like you. I suppose Marcy is having this same conversation with her."

"This is going to be so much fun, Alex," Samantha exclaimed before grabbing her toothbrush. She finished brushing and walked over to give the brunette, who was sitting on the bed watching her, a good morning kiss. "I can't believe we're going to see Ellen!"

"Believe it. Now get dressed and let's go. I already have the suitcase down in the car, so we're just waiting for you two stragglers. It's only nine o'clock, so we're still ahead of schedule with plenty of time to stop for food. I'm going downstairs while you're in the shower. I want to make sure everything's running smoothly downstairs and that everyone who's supposed to be here today showed up." Without waiting for an answer, she left the apartment and headed for the Center.

Within the half-hour all four women climbed into the Suburban. They stopped for breakfast

before they reached the limits of Laguna and with full stomachs began their excursion.

Both the weather and the traffic were in their favor. Samantha loved the drive, especially when they started passing some of the quaint beach towns on their way to the larger city.

She sat in the back with Von and filled her friend in about their vacation in Sedona. Marcy let Alex drive the first half of the trip; then they switched places and Marcy drove the final hour and a half.

Check-in was quick and easy. Alex had reserved adjoining rooms and surprised her friends, who had thought they were all sharing one room. She insisted the hotel be her treat since they had bought the tickets for the concert. Because they were not going to take the time to do the theme park scene this time around, Alex booked them into a hotel across from the Egyptian Theater, formerly Mann's Chinese. Figuring they would be in Hollywood most of Saturday, Alex felt it was better to stay in the area.

The hotel had been renovated ten years prior and was a throwback to the 1920s. All the old wall coverings and furniture had been duplicated, and the women felt as if they were regressing to the days of flappers, gangsters, Prohibition, and bathtub gin.

"What an elegant building," Samantha commented as they followed the bellboy to their rooms.

Alex smiled, knowing her choice had been the right one. "I thought we all might enjoy a glimpse of what was elite during the Roaring Twenties," she said. "Style has a way of bypassing generations. I requested rooms with a view of the theater across the street," Alex continued as she walked toward the window and pulled the curtain open to reveal the street below. "I thought it might be fun to watch the parade of characters that frequent Hollywood Boulevard."

"And tomorrow we get to match our prints to those of the stars, right?" Samantha asked, joining her lover at the window.

"Most definitely. Marcy and I did that years ago when we were still in high school," the brunette grinned at her old friend. "It's good to relive old times with good friends."

"Yeah, we were wild and crazy then," Marcy agreed.

"Then?" Samantha chuckled and received a friendly swat on her butt.

"Hey, I still resemble that remark, at least when you're around," Alex admitted. "I haven't been considered wild for quite some time, though I do admit the term crazy probably followed me into adulthood." She pulled her lover close and kissed her.

"If anyone's tired, we have enough time for a short nap before we need to get ready."

It seemed that food was more essential than rest, since no one would confess to being tired from the drive. The group decision was to have a snack down in the hotel café before going to their

respective rooms to get ready for the evening's festivities.

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Hours later they were still laughing as they exited the amphitheater and headed for their car.

"I don't think I've laughed so much in years," Von stated as they reached the vehicle and got in.

"Ditto," Samantha agreed. "I always thought she was funny, but seeing her in person is amazing. I really liked the way she interacted with the audience. It felt more like we were one huge family."

"That's one of her charms," Marcy noted when she finally got a word in.

"I want to thank the two of you again for a lovely birthday present," Samantha told her friends.

"Hey, we enjoyed it as much as you did. It's nice to lavish a little luxury on ourselves and our friends, occasionally."

"Okay, I think everyone is in agreement that tonight was special, the seats were fantastic, and the show was marvelous," Alex acknowledged, butting into the conversation. "But . . . I'm sure there's at least one person in this group who must be starving by now. I'll even admit to being very hungry; that snack we had was gone hours ago. Does anyone have any suggestions as to where to go for dinner?"

"I certainly don't," Samantha answered, giggling. "But I know I'm the starving person you were referring to."

"Alex, do you remember that little after-hours place we used to go when the bars closed?" Marcy asked. "It's not much on atmosphere, but the food was always good, and the price was reasonable."

"Well, we're not dressed for the Magic Castle anyway," her friend responded. "Yes, I remember where it is; let's just hope it's still there and they still have the same cook. Is everyone in favor of a little Old California hippie cuisine?"

"Okay by me," Von chimed in.

"You have my vote," Samantha voiced.

"Okay, then I guess it's unanimous; American Jane's here we come." Alex followed the line of traffic out of the parking lot and headed in the direction of Sunset Boulevard.

Samantha couldn't believe the wide variety of characters that could be seen both in the restaurant and parading on the street outside.

"Welcome to Hollywood," Marcy smiled. She watched the look on her friend's face as old hippies, young Goths, skinheads, and rebels of every persuasion filtered in and around the area where they were eating. "They say America is a melting pot, but I believe the most variety is based right here in Hollywood."

"I'll agree," Samantha stated. "We don't see quite the mish-mash of people where I come from. But, you know, it's great to see all these people coming together and getting along; it kind of gives me hope for the human race."

"I don't know how well they all get along," Alex interjected, "but I guess it's as well as any large group of diverse people."

After they finished eating they continued to sit, watch people, and talk until the evening melted into early morning. During a lull in the conversation Alex glanced down at her watch.

"Hey," she addressed her little group, "I think we've talked the night away. Is anyone ready to go back to the hotel?"

"I am," Marcy admitted. "I think the drive is finally catching up with me."

"The drive, the excitement, a full stomach, and the time," Samantha laughed.

"Plus we have a busy day tomorrow," Von agreed. "Did you mention that we might go to the La Brea Tar Pits, Alex?"

"It was on my list, if that's what everyone agrees to," the brunette replied.

Everyone did agree, and they also all agreed that going back to the hotel and getting some sleep would be the best way to insure that they were all in decent moods come morning.

Marcy drove back to the hotel in a quiet car; it seemed everyone had talked the day away and exhaustion was settling in. Samantha had her head in the crook of Alex's arm, and before they were halfway back to the hotel, the small woman's breathing was slow and rhythmic. Von was also having a difficult time keeping her eyes open, and by the time they reached their destination, both Marcy and Alex had sleepyheads to awaken.

On the way up to the rooms, they decided to leave wake-up calls with the front desk and meet in Alex and Samantha's room at 10:00. Breakfast would be first on the agenda, followed by a visit to the footprints of the stars, a stroll down the Walk of Fame, and then on to the tar pits.

Samantha took one last look out the window at the famous boulevard below before crawling into bed next to Alex. "I guess I have the birthday that never stops giving this year," the small blonde said as she cuddled close to her lover.

"It certainly seems that way," Alex agreed. "The concert tonight was a stroke of genius. Marcy and Von really picked a marvelous gift."

"They certainly did. And now we have tomorrow to look forward to, also. I can't wait to match my handprints with those of the stars."

"You think having the same size hands will bring you fame?" Alex smiled and drew her lover closer.

"No, I'm not that silly. I just think it'll be fun seeing whose hands are the same size as mine. By the way, I had a great day and evening, Alex." Samantha tilted her head to receive a kiss goodnight.

"So did I, honey. Sweet dreams."

"You, too, Alex. See ya in the morning."

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At 10:00 sharp there was a knock on the door. Alex went to answer it while Samantha finished up in the bathroom.

"She's almost ready," the brunette told Marcy. She offered her a cup of coffee from the stash the hotel had supplied, then searched beyond her friend only to find that she was alone. A questioning eyebrow arched and was greeted with a smile from her friend.

"Yeah, she's still in the bathroom. I imagine that's the same place I'd find Samantha?"

"Absolutely."

The two old friends walked over to the window and looked down on Hollywood Boulevard.

"It's been a long time since we've been here together, Alex."

"Brings back good memories, though, memories that I've carried through a lot of rough times. Remember the first time we visited those concrete memorials across the street, Marcy?" she nodded out the window.

"I sure do. You had just gotten your driver's license, and your parents bought you that midnight blue Corvette with the diamond finish that you had been drooling over for months. I can still remember the look on your mother's face when Kelley told her that she had given you permission to drive up here and spend the evening. She didn't want you getting too tired to make the trip home so had made reservations for us to stay overnight in . . ."

"This hotel," Alex added with a smile.

"Damn, it was this hotel, wasn't it?" Marcy shook her head.

"Yeah, but it looked a lot different then."

"I'll say--pre-restoration!"

"What do you think about renting some Roaring Twenties costumes this afternoon and going down to the speakeasy in the basement of the hotel for dinner tonight?"

"Alex, that's a fantastic idea. I think Von and Sam will love dressing up like flappers. And I can't say I wouldn't love looking at them. Have you talked to Samantha about it?"

"No, actually the idea just came to me. Let's wait until lunch to bring it up, okay?"

"Sure," Marcy agreed.

Before they had a chance to solidify what they wanted to do later in the evening, Samantha came out of the bathroom and looked around the room. "Looks like I'm not the last one dressed," she observed.

"Nope, it seems that Von is even slower than you are this morning."

No sooner were the words out of Marcy's mouth than the door opened and the missing group member waltzed in. "So, is everyone ready to go eat?"

"Yeah," Alex smirked. "We haven't kept you waiting, have we?"

"Not at all," Von giggled in response. She sauntered over to Marcy and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Samantha suggested they eat at the pancake house she had spotted within walking distance from the hotel. Since no one objected, the small group started on their Hollywood adventure.

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About an hour later, the four friends were standing in front of the concrete memorials to the stars. Samantha was amazed at how small the impressions of Judy Garland's hands were, and she had a great time coaxing Alex to do some comparing of her own.

The friends took turns calling each other to gawk at some of the eccentric patterns in the cement. There were Sonja Henie's skate blades, George Burns' cigar, Bob Hope's nose, R2D2's tread marks, and Whoopi Goldberg's braid. The autographs alone kept the group reading for more time than Alex had anticipated spending at the theater.

Samantha even dared her lover to step into Darth Vader's footprints and laughed when her hero's feet were dwarfed by the giant prints.

"You didn't really expect them to match, did you?" Alex shook her head at Samantha.

"Well, you're my hero, I just figured yours were as . . ."

A hand went across the smaller woman's mouth to stop the continuation of thoughts Alex didn't want broadcast throughout the visiting throng. "Let's just keep the hero statements in the family, shall we?" The dark-haired beauty smiled and breathed a sigh of relief when she realized that Von and Marcy were too far away from them to have heard the conversation.

"Why, Alex," Samantha giggled. "I do believe you're blushing."

"I am not," the tall woman professed. "Are you ready to go get the car and go visit the tar pits?" Alex asked.

"Sure. You're the tour guide."

They found the other two women reading about the Oscar winners from various years, and Samantha joined them until everyone was satisfied that they had seen enough.

Von had never been to the pits either, and both she and Samantha were astonished when they saw the life-sized replicas of furry mammoths and saber-toothed cats standing in the black, bubbling tar in front of the museum.

"It's hard to believe that at one time this entire area was overrun by wild animals," Von stated as she stood looking into the pits.

"What do you mean?" Alex joked. "It's still overrun by wild animals."

"Smart ass," Von countered. "Is the museum interesting, or is it like walking through the Museum of Art?"

"I like art museums," Samantha added to the conversation.

"You would," Marcy chuckled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" The blonde was not sure whether to be offended by her friend's remark.

"It's just that you artistic types always seem to enjoy places of quiet reflection. Personally, I would rather be watching a volleyball or basketball game."

"Uh huh," Samantha nodded, comprehending the meaning of the statement. "I could be coerced to go to one of those games, not that I would understand everything that would be happening, but I imagine, if I were with the right people, I could still have a good time."

"Touché, Samantha," her friend smiled at her. "Are you ready to go explore the mysteries of days gone by--the days when huge mammoths, saber-toothed cats, and dire wolves roamed free

throughout this entire area?"

"I think we're all ready to go inside," Alex replied. "You know you'll enjoy this museum as much as the next person, Marcy." The tall brunette shook her finger in her friend's direction. "I can remember you standing for the longest stretch of time playing with that damned stick that's stuck in the tar. You wanted to prove that you were stronger than any of the rest of us that day, remember?"

Red-faced and without answering, Marcy grinned at Alex, shook her head, and then turned and walked toward the building, waving for her friends to follow.

The next few hours were lost in visions of the Ice Age and pictures of excavations. When they finished, Alex asked if they wanted to do the Walk of Fame first or eat lunch. The consensus turned out to be both. Marcy suggested that they find a restaurant along the Walk of Fame, and that way they wouldn't have to interrupt their sightseeing.

Samantha hadn't realized that the Walk of Fame included not only people from the motion picture industry but also those from live theater, radio, television, and music. She was like a kid in a candy shop as they walked along the boulevard. She would stop and squeal with delight each time she recognized a name. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and soon Von was giggling and pointing to the names as they passed the pink and charcoal terrazzo squares. Although the Egyptian Theater was running low on space for newcomers to make their mark in cement, there were plenty of empty stars yet to be filled with famous names along the streets of Hollywood.

At lunch Marcy and Alex brought up the idea of renting Roaring Twenties costumes and spending the latter part of the evening at the restaurant and speakeasy in the hotel. The other two women were thrilled with the idea and giggled in anticipation of becoming flappers for a night.

Alex mentioned that since they were in the area and still had the rest of the afternoon, it might be fun to get the costumes first and then drive over to West Hollywood and do some shopping until it was closer to dinnertime. "There are some interesting stores in the area and an extremely unusual book establishment that's an all-time favorite of mine."

"The Bodhi Tree?" Marcy inquired.

"The one and only," Alex affirmed. "I figure we have time to pick out the costumes, go to the Bodhi, and then maybe stop at one or two of the crystal shops close by."

Everyone agreed that it sounded like an excellent way to spend the rest of the afternoon. Before leaving the restaurant, they asked the waiter if he knew where the closest costume shop was, and they were in luck because it was actually within walking distance.

There were quite a few styles for the gals to choose from, and they had a grand time picking out what they wanted to wear. Samantha was the first to finish putting her ensemble together. She had found a beautiful emerald green, fringe-style flapper dress, with head feathers and gloves to match. The salesperson brought out the jewelry that went along with the era, and Samantha



picked out a long string of pearls, one she could wrap around her neck and still have hanging long enough to swing. They even had matching shoes that fit.

Von was going to get one of the long lace dresses but she changed her mind at the last minute and got a Charleston dress, similar to Samantha's, except hers was red velvet and longer than the one the blonde was going to wear. Instead of dangling pearls, she decided on a choker.

While Von and Samantha were busy looking through the dresses, Alex and Marcy were picking through the gangster, bootlegger, and bodyguard garb. The two old friends went into a stall by themselves and refused to let the other two women see the costumes they had picked out.

"No fair, Alex," Samantha whined. "We modeled our outfits for you."

"First off, the fair is in Pomona, Samantha." The taller woman smiled at the pouting blonde. "Second, you had to show us what you were wearing so we could go and pick out something that would match. Be a sport and be surprised."

"Oh, okay," Sam agreed, quickly changing her frown to a smile. "This is going to be so much fun!"

While they were checking out, Alex added fishnets, a white boa, and a long cigarette holder to Samantha's list of accessories.

"We're going to a lot more places than you had mentioned on the way here, Alex," Samantha commented as they walked back to the hotel to get the car.

"It seems the more we walk around the city, the more I remember all the places there are to see. One of these times we'll have to come back and go up to the Magic Castle for dinner. I think you'll really like that, Samantha."

"I like any place that I go with you, Alex. Everything is new to me here, so it's all exciting." She put her hand in her lover's as they continued toward their vehicle.

"Next stop Melrose Avenue and the Bodhi Tree. Marcy, do you want to give the girls a little rundown on the history of the place?"

"Sure, I think I remember the speech all the newbies get on their first visit." She smiled at her friend in the front seat. "Let's see, I guess the best place to start would be with what a bodhi tree is and where it originated. Metaphysically, the bodhi tree is known as the 'Tree of Enlightenment.' The particular tree of legend grew upon the banks of an auxiliary of the Ganges River. It was said that the Buddhas received enlightenment when sitting under the tree meditating.

"When the owners of the Bodhi Tree originally opened its doors, they had a small potted tree sitting in the front window. As the years passed, the tree thrived and needed to be transplanted. The bodhi on Melrose Avenue is now nearly three stories high and is an easy landmark to note

when instructing people on how to get to the bookstore.

"The store itself is no less a landmark as you'll see when you get there. I can still remember the first time Aurora dragged Alex and me up to West Hollywood, kicking and screaming that we didn't want to spend a perfectly good Saturday stuck in the confines of a stupid bookstore. Boy, did we regret the fuss we made! It is one of the most tranquil and relaxing places in this busy city, and even though it's extremely busy, you never feel a sense of being rushed.

"There, boss lady, how was that for an introduction to one of the most popular bookstores in the Los Angeles area?" Marcy turned and grinned at her friend.

"I'd have to say on a scale of one to ten you did pretty good. I'd give you an eight."

"What do you mean an eight?"

"You didn't bother to mention what **kind** of a book store it basically is," Alex countered.

"Don't you think they ought to be able to see that for themselves?"

"Okay, you two, enough," Von interrupted.

"Besides," Samantha joined in, "I think we're coming upon it now, if your description was correct." She pointed out the window at the house with the distinguished tree gracefully shading the backyard.

"Good eyes, Sammie," Marcy praised.

"Or a very good description of what we were looking for," Samantha complimented and watched as her friend smiled sarcastically at Alex.

"Okay, let's give ourselves an hour in here. In case we get separated, we'll meet out here by the car, agreed?" Alex asked the rest of her small group. They all did.

She mentioned that if they only stayed an hour that would give them an hour to spend at the crystal shop, also, before having to return to the hotel to dress for dinner.

True to Alex's words, Samantha was enthralled the minute she stepped into the eclectic establishment. The smell of incense wafted through the air, titillating her senses and immediately causing her body to relax. "What is that scent, Alex; do you know?"

"Smells like Nag Champa Satya Sai Baba to me," her lover answered and received a questioning look from the blonde. "It's one of the more popular incenses imported from India," Alex explained.

"I can understand why, but it's certainly a mouthful to say. Do you think we could get some to take home?"

"Sure, but I have a feeling you'll be picking up more than you can carry around with you by the time you get through all the rooms."

They continued to walk through the store. Samantha couldn't help but comment on how organized the shop seemed to be. Unlike some of the larger bookstores that Samantha knew and loved, this place had a feeling of home. They traveled from room to room, observing the patrons sitting in comfortable chairs and reading excerpts from their favorite books; mandalas and paintings adorned the walls. There was herbal tea for anyone who was thirsty, and a feeling of peace and tranquility emanated from every corner.

Marcy and Von separated from their friends and ventured into the section on Wicca, Runes, and Shamanism. Alex steered Samantha in the direction of the Reiki books, and then to those on reincarnation. They passed by an area with how-to books, and Samantha picked up an interesting book on Feng Shui. "Do you have any books like this one at home?" she asked her mate.

"As a matter of fact, I think I do," Alex answered. "We can check it out at home, and if I don't have one you want, we can either come back up some weekend or you can order one online or over the phone."

"Great, then I'll just put this one back."

By the time they were ready to check out, Alex had her arms full. Samantha had picked up a book on chakra healing and a set of runes and a book to go with them that Von had pointed out to her when they found themselves together in one of the smaller rooms. Both Alex and Sam had fallen in love with a Tibetan mandala that they swore had been made to hang in front of one of the windows in their bedroom. By the time they were done admiring the decorative object, neither one of them could leave the shop without it.

"I've never seen so many books on mysticism, philosophy, metaphysics, and spiritual topics all in one place before," Samantha noted as they stood in the checkout line. "And I noticed Mom's books and tapes are all in here."

"Yeah, she's a pretty big seller here," Alex acknowledged as she stepped up to pay for their items. She was immediately recognized and greeted by the clerk. The ebony-haired beauty felt her face flush slightly when Samantha squeezed her hand at the clerk's recognition. She bent down enough to whisper in her lover's ear, "Sometimes it goes with the territory. Wait until you become famous."

"As if," Samantha answered with a chuckle.

They spotted Marcy and Von already at the car and hurried to catch up with their friends.

The final stop before they had to get back to the hotel and clean up for dinner was the crystal shop Alex had mentioned earlier. Alex had called the hotel to make reservations for dinner at 8:30 and found out that they had a dinner show on Saturday evenings, so their timing was

perfect. They needed to be seated by 8:00 sharp because that was when they started serving.

"I don't want to hurry anyone through the store, but we should be back at the hotel in about an hour to give us plenty of time to change. Remember, we don't live so far that we can't come back and visit, and I'm sure they also have a catalogue or a website you can order from."

"No one thinks you're being pushy, Alex; you're just being the general," Von chimed in as they walked into the building.

"Yeah, we all know you're the boss," Marcy added, smiling at her friend.

"Hey, stop picking on her." Samantha stepped closer and stood in front of Alex, as if to defend her.

"Oh, I'm scared," Marcy laughed, her hands up in front of her in an "I give up" position.

"Okay, enough funny stuff," Alex ended the conversation. "We're short on time, so you can stand here and be comedians or we can shop."

"Shop is my vote," Samantha admitted.

"Mine, too," Von agreed.

"Gods, Alex! I don't think I've ever seen so many rainbow objects in one room at the same time." Samantha picked up a small crystal ball and gazed into it. "This is lovely, and look, the stand is comprised of three unicorns." Her fingers tingled as she touched the perfectly clear globe, and a chill ran through her body. She quickly shook off the feeling when she felt Alex's hand touch her own.

"You know it would look right at home on the bar in the family area, and it would certainly be a conversation piece." Alex watched while Samantha continued to examine the sphere and the cradle it was meant to rest in.

When Sam started to turn the crystal in her hand over to look at the price, a larger hand covered her own. "Honey," Alex whispered, "that's one of the things you can start forgetting to do. If you like something, we'll get it. You don't have to check the price, okay?"

Samantha looked up into sapphire eyes that displayed the love the dark-haired beauty felt for her. She nodded her head. "It **would** be a great conversation piece, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would, and you can consider it ours," Alex asserted.

A few more trinkets and a pair of crystal earrings later, the four friends were once again on their way to the hotel. Alex and Marcy had decided that they would dress in Marcy and Von's room and that Samantha and Von could dress in the other room.

"You mean we won't get to see what you're wearing until you . . ."

"Come and pick you up," Alex finished Samantha's sentence for her.

"Add a little spice to the evening," Marcy agreed as they exited the elevator. Alex handed Samantha the bag containing the dresses and accessories.

"I added a few items I don't think you saw." Alex smiled at her lover with one eyebrow slightly raised.

Samantha simply grinned back at her, shaking her head, as she took the bag from Alex's outstretched hand.

"I need to get a few things from the room first," Von announced.

"Sure, but you'd better hurry; you only have one hour to get dressed," Marcy reiterated to her partner.

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Two teenagers couldn't have had more fun than Samantha and Von did as they donned the costumes they had rented for the evening. They giggled together, trying to imagine what their partners in the next room had picked to wear.

"Oh, Vonnie, look," Samantha squealed as she drew the long cigarette holder out of the bag. "I get to play the vamp tonight."

"But you don't smoke."

"No, but I can pretend." The blonde waved the holder around in mock Bette Davis fashion.

"Dahling," she enunciated with grand exaggeration.

Her dramatic debut was cut short by a sharp knock on the adjoining door.

"Who's there?" Von questioned, as if she didn't know.

"Youse dolls ready to go dinin' and dancin'?" The voice was definitely Marcy's, the accent East Coast.

"Wouldya listen to that, Sammie; they want to know if we're ready." Von raced to the door and opened it then stepped back, her hands across her face.

"By the gods!" Samantha exclaimed. "Would you look at the two of you."

Alex was the first to walk in. "You look great, Samantha, but I think that holder of yours is lacking something."

Samantha was frozen in place for a second before she exclaimed, "Alex, you look . . . wow! Turn around and let me get the full impact."

With her hands in her pockets, Alex slowly spun around, sporting a black hat, jacket, and shirt. She wore a white tie and a pinstriped vest with pants that matched. Spats set the outfit off nicely. She opened her jacket to expose a shoulder holster and gun. "I've always wanted to love a moll," the dark-haired beauty announced as she drew Samantha close.

"Oh, and to be a gangster's moll has always been my life's ambition," the small blonde chuckled, as she fingered the fake gun. "Honey, I don't think they'll let you into the restaurant with this, even if it isn't real."

"I know that," Alex stated. "I just wanted to see how it looked to have the entire outfit on. So . . . whatd'ya think, kiddo?"

"I think you're the most beautiful gangster I've ever laid eyes on," Samantha answered.

"Hey, what about me?" Marcy asked.

"Well, let me have a look at you, too." Samantha turned her attention away from the gorgeous figure standing in front of her and looked at her friend.

Marcy wore a similar black hat, shirt, and pants, with a white tie. Instead of a vest, she was wearing suspenders, and she, too, had a shoulder holster and gun.

"I must say the two of you very much look the part. Are you Alex's bodyguard?"

"You bet your sweet ass, little lady, and yours, too," Marcy answered in her roughest New York accent. "And yours, too," she continued as she took Von into her arms. "So, youse ready to go eat?"

"Just as soon as you two hoodlums get rid of the metal works," Von scolded. "I don't want to be escorted out of the hotel at gunpoint by the real thing. But I do have to admit they add to the costume and would be fantastic at a party where everyone knew they were plastic."

Reluctantly, the gangster and the bodyguard relieved themselves of their holsters and guns. Alex took a pack of cigarettes out of her jacket pocket and inserted one in Samantha's holder. "What's a cigarette holder without the real thing?" She smiled as Sam waved the prop around, pretending she was smoking.

"Okay, you clowns, let's get going before we don't have a good seat for the show." Marcy stood by the now open door and beckoned the stragglers to hurry.

Double takes and side-glances by the hotel guests as the foursome walked by kept the friends smiling all the way to the lower level of the hotel and the speakeasy entrance. The maitré d' was

quite impressed when the women arrived at his station, and after the handshake he received from Alex, he was even more pleased to seat them at the best table in the room.

The dinner was exquisite, and the entertainment started as the dessert was being served. They sat, watched, and listened as the performers on stage took the audience back to a bygone era in dance and song. When the show was over, the band continued to play, and Alex was not going to let Samantha get away without showing how the fringe on her outfit moved to the music of the Roaring Twenties.

"I thought you didn't like to fast dance," Samantha reminded her mate, trying to keep from having to get out onto the dance floor.

"I don't like to do the fast dancing of today," was her lover's answer. "But the Charleston is something totally different."

"What if I said I don't know how to Charleston?"

"Then I'd teach you. I want to see you shimmy and shake." Alex took her by the hand and led her out to the floor. "So, do you know how to Charleston?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Samantha confessed. "We did a show in high school with a number in it. I never thought I'd be using the steps ever again."

The four costumed guests continued to amaze the rest of the customers as they danced to music that had been popular years before any of them were born. After one obviously reminiscent dance, an older couple sent a bottle of champagne over to the table and had the waiter thank the women for bringing back beautiful memories of stamina and youth. They drank a toast to their benefactors and made sure to stop by their table and talk for a while between dances.

The remainder of the evening sped by, and before anyone knew it, the band was playing a goodnight song, letting everyone know it was closing time.

"All good things must end," Alex whispered into Samantha's ear as they danced the final dance.

"Not all good things, my love," Samantha whispered back.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?"

"I believe you made mention of the fact a few times throughout the evening." The blonde chuckled because she sensed that Alex was perhaps feeling her champagne. "You look quite debonair yourself," Samantha made sure to add.

"Always, with you at my side," Alex countered. She discreetly kissed Samantha on the cheek, and then walked her off the dance floor and over to where Marcy and Von were standing, ready to leave.

"That was a great evening," Von announced as they entered the elevator.

"I think we all had a lot of fun," Marcy agreed.

"So, how are we going to dress the next time we go out dancing?" Samantha asked, grinning.

"Oh, we'll think of something," Alex answered.

Upon reaching their respective rooms, the couples said goodnight. Alex reminded Marcy that checkout time was 10:30 a.m., so they needed to be up and packed by then.

"So, my little flapper," Alex began when the door was closed and they were finally alone.  
"Fringe definitely does you justice."

"Oh, you just like to watch me shimmy," Samantha answered.

"Guilty as charged," Alex agreed. "But even more than I like to see you in that outfit, I would like to see you out of it right about now."

"Aren't you tired, after all that dancing and . . ."

"Are you?"

"Not really," Samantha admitted.

"Well . . ."

"How about a quick shower?"

Coat, tie, shirt, shoes, dress, boa, feather, stockings--all lay scattered on the floor leading to the bathroom as the two lovers entered the tiled area totally out of costume and back to the present day.

Minutes later their sweet smelling bodies lay wrapped around each other in the middle of the large bed.

"I can thank you right now for this marvelous weekend, Alex, but remind me when we get started home to thank Marcy and Von again for the tickets to Ellen. After all, that's what prompted this little trip."

"I will, sweetheart," Alex promised.

Pulling the smaller woman on top of her, Alex ran her fingers through silken hair. She gently pushed back the locks from the delicate face and then brought Samantha's face down close to her own. Alex showered Samantha with butterfly kisses before drawing her even closer for a kiss of passion and desire. "My entire body is on fire," the beautiful brunette crooned into her lover's



ear.

Samantha could feel Alex's nipples as they responded to her soft touch. Then, with one swift motion their positions were reversed, and the taller woman was on top, slowly inching her body down her lover's, with fingers longing to touch every inch of skin between the top of Samantha's head and the bottom of the smaller woman's feet.

Alex's fingers, tongue, lips, and even her teeth gently raked across the pale skin, so soft to the touch.

Moans of pleasure and fervent hunger filled the small room high above Hollywood Boulevard.

"Do you suppose someone famous might have slept in this . . ."

"Samantha, hush," Alex whispered as she began to taste the moist sweetness of her lover. "I love it when you get this hot."

Starting at the back of Samantha's ankles, Alex's adept hands traveled up toward her lover's thighs and behind her knees, lifting the smaller woman to within easy reach of her mouth as she held Samantha up off the bed.

"That's right, Samantha, move for me," Alex prompted, and she found herself being bathed in the warmth of her soulmate's body.

Letting go of the blonde's legs and placing her hands beneath Samantha, the smaller woman's legs draped over Alex's shoulders while the dark-haired beauty's tongue played within the recesses of pliant folds beneath fair curls.

Unable to keep still, the brunette's hands escaped from under the firm buttocks to gently caress nipples that were ripe with passion. She could feel Samantha's heart beat increase as her tongue found refuge on the swollen bud, and she kept a steady rhythm until Samantha practically screamed for her to go faster.

"Faster than this?" the brunette teased as she increased her speed only slightly.

"Gods, Alex," Samantha moaned, her hands on either side of the beautiful face she loved. She looked down and caught the twinkle of two dark eyes and a face dimly lit by the scattering of neon light drifting up through the window from the street below.

Alex studied Samantha's face attentively while her tongue continued to work its magic.

The next cry from Samantha was one of rapture. She now entreated Alex to stop. When Alex did remove her tongue from the throbbing bud, it was only to trade one form of heaven for another. She slowly slipped into the smaller woman with her index, middle, and ring fingers, and the dance of love began anew.

The taller woman drew her body up next to Samantha's and then turned on her back, maneuvering Samantha to first lie on top of her and then encouraging the blonde to sit up.

As her fingers reached their highest peaks inside her lover, Alex told Samantha to touch her simultaneously. "Just place your palm and push . . . what are you doing?"

"I will not just push," Samantha countered as she effortlessly went from straddling Alex's body to straddling only one leg. Her hand went down to play among the ebony locks, and her fingers soon found sanctuary within the moistness of her lover's appetite.

The intensity of the moment grew. Alex could feel the pounding begin inside her lover's body and her own passion growing with every thrust of the smaller woman's fingers.

There was a release of wetness that slipped between her fingers, covered her hand, and dripped down to mingle with her own moisture when she climaxed. Samantha leaned forward and placed her head upon Alex's chest.

The street below continued to bustle with excitement in the early morning hours, while two lovers found their way to mutual satisfaction and then lay exhausted with their arms wrapped around each other.

"Sounds of the city are certainly different from those of the ocean, aren't they, my Destiny?" Alex questioned.

"Yes, they are, my love," Samantha answered. "But I can guarantee, I'll sleep as peacefully as I do at home with my ear to your chest. The only sound that will lull me to sleep will be that of the beat of your heart."

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The only rush in the morning was to leave the hotel rooms before departure time, and the small group did that with exactly five minutes to spare.

Samantha was still in the bathroom when Alex opened the door to tell her that all she had to do was put whatever was on the counter into the overnight bag and bring it down with her.

"Marcy and I'll meet you and Von downstairs at the receptionist's desk. Just lock the doors behind you. We have everything else with us."

"Okay, Alex," Samantha answered with her mouth full of toothpaste. "I'll just be a minute."

The door between the rooms was open, and when Samantha came out of the bathroom she greeted Von. "Guess we have a reputation for being the stragglers."

"Yeah, but it's a lot easier on the back," Von grinned. She finished packing her own small bag and gave her room a final check before joining Samantha.

"Alex is usually more than thorough when we leave, but I guess I should take a last glance around this place, too." Samantha opened all the drawers and checked the closet, finding not a shred of their belongings left behind. "I knew she'd be meticulous; she always is." She walked to the window and looked down. "I want one more glimpse of Hollywood Boulevard from this height before we leave."

The two women stood beside each other and observed the busy street below. "I don't think this city ever sleeps," Samantha stated.

"I imagine you're right, Sam. I'll bet LA is running New York a close second in being a place where you can find whatever you want almost any time you want it."

"And like New York, it's a great place to visit, but I don't think I'd want to live here," Samantha said. "I like the solitude we have in Laguna and the sound of the ocean singing us to sleep at night. I like the cool sand between my toes on the mornings we make the time to walk along the beach, and the way the moonlight glistens on the surf as she floats high in the midnight sky."

"You truly are the romantic, Sammie," her friend grinned.

"How could I not be when I'm living the fairytale existence that every young girl dreams of?"

"This is true--and if you want to keep that reality, I suggest we grab our bags and head for the nearest descending elevator."

Samantha agreed, and the two friends walked out of the hotel room in search of their mates.

First on the morning's activities was to return the rented costumes, then the foursome shared a leisurely brunch at a small restaurant with an ocean view. On the way back to Laguna, Marcy and Von decided that they would stop at the Center just long enough for a rest break and something to drink before continuing home. They both had to work on Monday and didn't want to be getting in too late.

Samantha made sure to once again thank her friends for the concert tickets, and before they left, they all made tentative plans to meet between their two cities for dinner sometime in the not too distant future.

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After seeing Marcy and Von safely on their way, Samantha began unpacking. She was anxious to see how the crystal ball, in its beautiful holder, would look sitting in a place of honor on the bar. When she picked it up, she again felt a slight tingling that traveled throughout her entire body. The tingling started in her fingertips and radiated inward. It was a strange but not unpleasant feeling, and she was glad she had picked up a book on crystal gazing. This aspect of the occult was totally foreign to her, but she had a desire to learn more about it. She remembered how the orb almost seemed to call to her in the store and was glad Alex had talked her into

buying it. While she stood pondering on the purchase she held in her hands, she felt heat emanating from the ball. *Wow, must have something to do with the energy of the crystal. I need to do some studying, that's for sure.*

"There," she mumbled, putting the clear object into the unicorn holder and standing back to admire it. "How do you think that looks, Alex?"

"Looks great, hon," Alex answered without looking up from the report she was reading.

"Alex!"

"What?"

"You didn't even look."

"Sure I did," the dark-haired woman fibbed as she looked over the top of a page in the direction of the crystal orb. "It looks marvelous, just like you imagined. It will definitely be a conversation piece." She smiled sheepishly and went back to her reading.

Samantha disappeared into the bedroom to finish unpacking, and when she came out she asked if Alex wanted a glass of wine.

"Sounds great, thanks, Samantha."

While in the kitchen, Samantha took inventory of the Post-it notes that dotted the calendar on the refrigerator. "Hey, Alex, do you realize that Halloween's less than a month away?"

"Yes," Alex responded. "I imagine we'll be hearing from Sonny in about two weeks, reminding us that we're spending All Hallows Eve in San Francisco with him and Ray. I hoped to be able to take to you to Key West for the annual parade they throw every Halloween, but I suppose that can wait until next year."

Samantha smiled, walked over to her lover, and handed her a glass of wine. "I think we've enough years left to put that trip off this one time." She sat down next to Alex on the couch. "Should we be thinking of costumes to wear for this gala? Maybe we could do the same thing we did this weekend? You looked marvelous."

"You looked pretty cute yourself there, flapper girl," Alex smiled and gave Samantha a quick kiss on the cheek. "But I do believe that Sonny said he would take care of our outfits. He'll probably dress us all alike. We'll be the four musketeers or something."

"I think you mean the three musketeers, don't you?"

"Yeah, but there are four of us. Anyhow, it's one less thing we have to worry about. Sonny has so much fun preparing for events like this that I wouldn't want to deny him the pleasure."

"That's fine with me," Samantha agreed. She placed her glass on the table beside the couch and curled up, putting her head in Alex's lap. "You know, Alex, this has been the best--and longest--birthday I've ever had." She turned over to look up into her lover's face. "I've never had a celebration quite like the one that's been ongoing since the day we went down to your parents' house. Even falling into an ancient cave turned into the adventure of a lifetime." She gave pause and ran her fingers along the Grecian jaw line of her beloved. "I have you to thank for all of it."

Alex took Samantha's hand and gently kissed her fingertips. "It wasn't half of what I could have done, Samantha, except for the episode in the cave--I had no part in the orchestration of that. Anything you want, all you have to do is ask, and if it's in my power to get it for you, it's yours."

"Oh, Alex, I have everything I want." Samantha grinned, and then added, "Not that there aren't things I won't ask for; rest assured! I'm as human as the next gal. But what we have together is the way I always dreamed of life being--minus the abundance of money," she giggled.

Alex leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "I guess my response should be a simple 'you're welcome, Samantha.' I wanted your first birthday with me to be memorable."

"Well, you more than succeeded, if that was your intention. But all this fun can be exhausting. Now I just want to take a little nap, and then I want to start unpacking some of those boxes you have stored in the other room."

"Aha," Alex laughed. "You're going to start with **my** boxes before you empty out all the stuff you still have yet to unpack?"

"I already know what's in my boxes. Yours, on the other hand, are a mystery."

"And what if I don't want you unpacking my boxes?" The quizzical eyebrow rose and a crooked smile crossed the face of the dark-haired beauty.

"Oh, Alex." Samantha sat up and became very serious. "I'm sorry, I just assumed . . ."

"I'm kidding you, Samantha. You go right ahead and poke through anything your little heart desires. Just be aware that there was a time when you weren't around, and some things in those boxes may point that out to you more than others."

"I understand. I know you had a life before me, even if I didn't have one before you." Emerald green eyes looked soulfully into sapphire blue.

"Are you sure you want to start on a project that large this late on a lazy Sunday afternoon?" Alex asked. "Why don't we take that nap together, and then get up, go have some dinner, and perhaps take in one of those new movies you've been hinting that you want to see?"

All traces of the reflective mood disappeared from Samantha's eyes; they began to sparkle at the thought. "What if we call and ask Suz to go with us?"

"If you really want to, Samantha, but we've been with people all weekend. I thought perhaps just a quiet evening alone . . ."

Two small fingers gently touched her lover's lips as the blonde quieted the remainder of the sentence. "Say no more. We'll ask Suz some other time. Tonight, it'll just be you and me. No argument here." She got up from the couch and reached for Alex's hand. "You ready to join me?"

"In a few minutes, honey. I just want to finish looking over this report."

"Fine. You don't want to share me with a friend, but I have to share you with the office?"

"Samantha, just a few . . ." She looked into the angelic face in front of her and grinned.

Samantha stood batting her eyes and wiggling her index finger in a come hither fashion.

"You really are a hoot, my Destiny," the tall woman announced. She put the papers back into the file on the table and stood up. Reaching out, she grabbed the teasing digit and then pulled the smaller woman close. "Do you realize you have me wrapped around that finger of yours?"

Grinning from ear to ear, Samantha nodded her head. "Yeah, I must admit, I knew you'd say that."

The End of Sedona Rain

Continued in California Gold

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

WomynBard@aol.com.

## **Part 17**

### **Chapter 17**

Good intentions set aside, neither of the women had realized just how much the excitement of the weekend had drained them. Alex was showering when Samantha entered the bedroom; she had every intention of joining her mate but made the mistake of pulling down the covers first. The soft, warm bed was definitely enticing, and when Alex came out of the bathroom she found a very soundly sleeping Goldie Locks who was totally naked from the looks of the clothes on the floor but covered to her chin by the sheet and blanket. Curled up at the small woman's feet was a black fur ball, who was glad to have her people home.

Alex had secured the locks before leaving the kitchen area, but she rechecked to make sure Samantha hadn't left any lights on. Then, as quietly as possible, she crawled in next to the sleeper, doing her best not to awaken her.

"I had the most marvelous time this weekend, Sweetheart, thank you," Samantha mumbled as she re-adjusted herself to snuggle close to Alex.

"I thought you were sleeping."

"I was, but you feel so soft and smell so sweet, how could I not notice, even through my dreams?"

Alex's arm drew Sam even closer and she kissed her tenderly on the crown. "Back to dreamland, Sleepyhead, see you in the morning."

"Good night, Alex, sweet dreams."

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Normal Mondays were chaotic enough, but those after a long weekend meant there was catch-up work to be done as well as normal routine. Alex let Samantha sleep in while she went down to the clinic area to pick up notes left by supervisors and the agency therapist. From the looks of things, it had been a fairly quiet and smooth-running weekend. There were not any emergency complications, and within the half-hour, she was ready to check her e-mail in hopes of finding a similar situation. A message from Sedona reminded her that she hadn't taken the time to answer Gary's e-mail last week. She smiled at her friend's tongue-in-cheek scolding and promptly filled him in on everything that had been happening since her last correspondence. A message from Aurora reminded her that Thanksgiving was less than a month away. She made a note to discuss with Samantha inviting Sally down for the holiday, hoping she wouldn't feel guilty leaving her mother alone with her father on the special occasion. A few more messages from clients and she was finished with the catch-up work and ready to start the morning. There was still time for a decent breakfast with Samantha if she woke her up soon, so she hit the send button on her last mail and headed up to the penthouse.

Upon exiting the elevator, she could smell that she wouldn't be fighting with Samantha this morning to get her out of bed. "Ah! Just the odors I like to come home to." Placing her arms around the smaller woman's waist she nibbled on her lover's neck. "Good morning, Princess, did you sleep well?"

"Most definitely, thank you very much and a good morning to you, too." Samantha removed the skillet from the fire and turned to receive a morning kiss. "How long have you been up?"

"Oh, just a little over an hour. I thought I'd find you still sleeping soundly, and I would have to resort to a watery awakening." Sapphire eyes glistened with joviality as the taller woman looked into her sweetheart's face.

Samantha shook her head and laughed, "Guess I foiled that bit of morning fun. Will having breakfast be a close second in the satisfaction department?"

"Most definitely," Alex replied, reaching around Sam and grabbing a breakfast strip.

She got her fingers slapped, but not before she stuffed the entire strip into her mouth.

"Guess you get one less piece when we sit down," Samantha threatened.

"Nope," Alex countered, "that was yours."

Alex filled Samantha in on everything that had happened in their absence and reminded her to call Sally today and ask if she wanted to come visit during the Thanksgiving holiday. "If we ask her soon enough she might be able to come for a long four-day weekend. She could either fly into San Diego on Wednesday night or into John Wayne early on Wednesday and then ride down to La Jolla with us. I'm going to call Mom later tonight; she wrote me an e-mail over the weekend reminding us that the 25th is getting close."



"Listen, Alex, I know Shawn's going to call today. I've been thinking about meeting with him this morning, and if you have any problem with me going to dinner with him, I can make up some excuse and . . ."

"No!" The reply was emphatic even though there were mixed emotions in her heart. "That would be silly, Samantha. He's just an old friend, right?"

"Right."

"Did you sleep with him, Samantha?"

"Of course not! I told you we only went out a few times."

"Ohhh. Yes, you did," the brunette grinned. "I forgot, you don't make love on the very first date, right?" Now she was beaming from ear-to-ear, as she watched the small blonde begin to blush.

"What happened between us was a first, and you know it Alexis Dorian."

"Uh, huh ~ bet you tell that to all the girls."

Samantha swung the dishtowel she had been carrying over her shoulder and hit Alex on the inside of the thigh.

"Ouch!" Alex grabbed her leg, feigning great pain.

"Just go sit down and stop overacting. Breakfast is ready."

\*\*\*\*\*

Monday morning drifted into afternoon and just as quickly evening cast its shadow on the day. Alex was walking around after the cleaning crew, checking doors and windows and securing the area before calling it a day and going up to the apartment.

Samantha's voice was soft but laced with arsenic and a touch of sadness. Alex quietly closed the door so as not to disturb what sounded like a weighty conversation. The blonde acknowledged her lover's presence with a nod of her head and a quick smile that immediately disappeared back into a frown.

After getting them each a glass of wine, Alex put Samantha's on the table beside the phone, then went to stand in front of the windows to look out upon the moonlight drenched ocean. It was a cool evening and the breeze was blowing the whitecaps into disarray. Starlight sparkled down on the frothing liquid, and the brunette shivered at the thought of stepping into the cool water. Looking into the glass, she could see her lover's reflection, and her heart skipped a beat when she realized that Samantha was crying. She turned with a questioning look upon her face, just as Sam replaced the phone in its cradle.

Samantha looked away to hide her tears, but Alex was in front of her on her knees. She placed one hand on either side of the pale face and caught a falling tear with her thumb as it trickled down. "What's the matter, Sweetheart?"

"Everything's falling apart at home."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a long story, Alex. I've been on the phone with Sally for over an hour. Dad's becoming impossible to live with, and Mom is beside herself. Sally says he's on the road for a week at a time and that's fine with Mom because when he gets back he's terrible. He's started drinking heavily and when he does he becomes nasty. Sally said the last time she went to visit, Mom had a bruise on her arm and it was like pulling teeth to get her to talk about how she received it."

"Did Don hit her?"

Samantha hung her head and mumbled in the affirmative, tears beginning to stream down her face.

"Honey, don't," Alex begged. "Can we do anything to help?"

"I don't know," the smaller woman sobbed, allowing Alex to draw her close and burying her head in the strong shoulder that was provided for comfort and support. "It's just that we're so far away . . ."

"Do you need to go home to see your mom?"

"No!" Panic replaced the tears as she lifted her head and stared into confused blue eyes. "I can't go home, Alex, that would only make things worse."

"I guess you're right; I wasn't thinking. Is your mother fed up enough to leave, Samantha?"

"I think she's really close to that point, but she's just as afraid to leave him as to stay with him. You don't understand, Alex; he's been her total support for almost 30 years. She hasn't worked in that amount of time and she has no workable skills."

"Come on, Honey, of course she has some skills. She may have been out of the loop for a long time, but she's your mom, she can learn. Besides at your father would probably have to pay alimony simply **because** she hasn't worked in so long. And she will get part of the money from the house."

"Yeah, I guess my thinking's a little muddled tonight."

Alex got off her knees and sat beside Samantha on the couch. "Listen, Samantha, if your mother wants to make the break, we've already talked a little about her starting a small boutique in this area."

"I couldn't let you do that, Alex," Sam started to object.

"And why not?" the brunette sounded hurt. "If she's important to you, she's important to me. Besides, it would be a good business venture. This area could use a good metaphysical store, one with crystals, incense, books, you know, all the stuff you're getting into. Do you think your mom would like to operate something like that?"

Green eyes twinkled as the tears that had been filling them dried, and a smile brightened not only Samantha's face but Alex's heart as well. "You truly are my champion, Alex, always there to pick me up and make everything right. Sally led me to believe that the only reason Mom was not out of the house yet was because she didn't know how to start to leave."

"That's what I have lawyers for, my Darling. Never fear; we can get on top of this, and I can promise you that your mother will come out the victor. The only problem would be if she didn't want to leave the house. I'm sure the attorneys will advise her that selling the property is the only way to achieve a quick settlement and divorce."

"For now, let's just keep this between you and me and maybe I can get both Sally and Mom to come down for Thanksgiving. We kind of got off the subject tonight, but I'll call Sally again tomorrow and pose the question."

"In the meantime, I'll talk to a few of my lawyers and get their advice. So . . . what do you say to finishing our wine and retiring? You've had quite a busy evening."

"You don't have to ask me twice," Samantha smiled as she gently clinked her glass on Alex's. "Crying always makes me so tired."

They started going through the bedtime ritual, and Samantha remembered that she had received another call earlier in the evening. "By the way, Honey, Shawn called again tonight. Thank goodness he called before I talked to Sally. Anyway he'll be here next week, and I accepted his invitation for dinner on Wednesday evening. He's only going to be in town the one night so complications should be minimal. Besides, if he asks me any personal questions, he will simply have to deal with the answers."

"Only if you're comfortable giving them," Alex insisted.

"Hey, the only people I was feeling awkward about were my parents, and that's ancient history." She hopped into bed next to Alex and curled up into her usual position.

"Guess this is another evening of just going to sleep?" Alex asked as she caressed the smaller woman's upper arm.

"Alex, I feel kind of . . ."

"I know, and I understand. I'm merely beginning to feel like an old married couple."

"And is that bad?"

"Well, in some respects it could be."

"What if I promise to make it up to you."

"You, my Destiny, have yourself a deal." She kissed the flaxen crown and squeezed her lover tightly. "I love you, Samantha, sweet dreams."

"Sweet dreams, Alex, and I love you, too."

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Tuesday provided a few surprises when one of the lecturers suddenly cancelled. Samantha was racing with the clock to get a replacement speaker to discuss a similar, if not the same, topic. As dilemmas tend to do, working against time made the day speed by even quicker than usual. Before the duo realized it, another day was at an end.

The middle of the week arrived as Wednesday morning dawned bright and sunny. The day started out uneventful, and the tone seemed to remain constant throughout the day. Samantha had scheduled a late dinner engagement with Shawn after his business meeting, so she wouldn't be picked up until 8:00 o'clock. Alex had decided to work through until closing. As ridiculous as it sounded, she knew going up to an empty apartment would drive her nuts. She needed to keep herself busy while Samantha was out and could think of nothing better than to bury herself in work.

Before retiring upstairs to change for the evening, Sam had informed the receptionist that a male friend would be inquiring about her and asked if she would please call the penthouse and let her know when he arrived. Now, the receptionist was receiving conflicting instructions from Alex to contact her first when the man arrived. "I'll make sure he gets to Samantha, you just make sure he comes to me first," were her exact words. Not wanting to anger either of the bosses, she figured her best bet was to follow the latter instructions and personally escorted Shawn to Alex's office when he arrived. She knocked on the executive's door and waited for an invitation to enter.

When he walked into the room Alex got a nauseous feeling of déjà vu. This man looked like a younger version of someone whose likeness did not bring forth pleasant memories.

"Ms. Dorian," the receptionist began, "this is Mr. . . ."

"Shawn McDouglas," the young man held out his hand as he walked toward the massive desk and the tall executive rising to meet him.

*Goddess, help me,* Alex inaudibly murmured as she got up to meet him half way. *I know his weasel of a father.* She put on her best smile and shook the hand that was now in front of her. "Alexis Dorian, Mr. McDouglas, it's a pleasure to meet you."

His hand was damp and his grip was weak, not at all a healthy first impression. Alex smiled, concealing the fact that she remembered telling one of her top salespeople to drop this man's father's company like a hot potato. The senior McDouglas was an underhanded sleaze and not worth the effort of courting to get his pathetic business.

With the smile now pasted on her face, she continued, "Samantha is upstairs getting dressed. I thought perhaps you might like a drink while waiting for her to finish?"

"Sure." He swallowed hard. "That would be great. I can't wait to see Sammie again. But, you know, I wouldn't mind getting a look around this Center of yours either, Ms. Dorian; it's very impressive."

"Excellent, Shawn," Alex smiled, not bothering to tell him to call her Alex. "If you don't mind, I'll have one of my assistants show you around, while I go up and let Samantha know that you're here."

"Great."

*He does have an elaborate vocabulary, now doesn't he? Alex sighed to herself. And I was worried about him and Samantha? "So, what's your pleasure, Shawn?"*

"Ah, whatever you're having will be fine."

"Well, I'm not going to have anything right now. I'm not totally stocked, but there's Goldschlager, Goldenbarr, Chivas Regal Century, Tanqueray Citrus, Southern Comfort, and Tuaca. Do any of those strike your fancy?"

Looking a little dazzled, he took a second or two before answering. "The Tanqueray Citrus on the rocks, please."

"Coming right up." Alex opened the cabinet sitting behind her desk and took out a tall bottle of flavored vodka. She poured and handed him the drink and then escorted him out of the office and toward the gym in search of Angel. She knew the assistant didn't have another patient for an hour and after a short introduction, asked if she would be so kind as to show Shawn around the Center. Excusing herself, she headed toward the elevator and up to the penthouse.

Cautioning herself to not sound egotistical, she opened the door and called for Samantha. "Oh, Sammie, your dinner date has arrived."

Samantha shook her head and sighed; this was going to be a big mistake. She cursed herself for not telling Shawn she couldn't see him. "Come on, Alex, give me a break. I know he's not the sharpest tool in the shed, but he's not the dullest, either. Why the flippant remark?" She rounded the corner from the bedroom to the living area and stopped her lover dead in her tracks.

"You look way too lovely to be going out with that throwback to the seventies, Samantha. Wow!"

The blonde smiled as she did a little twirl in front of her lover. "Do you really like it? It's something I pulled out of one of my boxes this afternoon."

Alex stared at the hunter green, velvet pants suit that adorned her lover's body. The bodice was V-shaped, and she had chosen to wear her Chinese good luck earrings and the matching necklace with the unicorn.

Samantha noticed Alex staring at the jewelry and commented, "I thought if I wore this, I'd be taking a little of you with me tonight, and I wouldn't feel so alone." She smiled and continued, "Besides it's suppose to ward off evil beasts or at least calm the savage ones."

Still not receiving a smile from her lover she walked closer and put her arms around Alex's waist. "You know, I can still call off the dinner. It's not that important to me."

Alex kissed her lover's head before tilting the smaller woman's face toward her own. "I love you, Samantha Riley, and I trust you implicitly. But, my Darling, you look like a temptress in that outfit. It's enough to make anyone cream their jeans."

The last statement turned the solemn moment into a jovial one. "I don't think Shawn will be creaming his jeans, Alex," Samantha giggled, "but thanks for the compliment." On tiptoe she gave Alex a peck on the cheek.

"Maybe not, but he could definitely show you that he was happy to see you." Finally, the brunette was also wearing a genuine smile. She grabbed Samantha by the arm as the blonde was walking away and spun her around to face her. "You might be going off with the beast, but not until you get a kiss of love from your Princess Charming. I want you to remember what's waiting for you at home." Gently, she bent down and placed a soft kiss on welcoming lips. Samantha's mouth opened slightly, allowing Alex's tongue to trace the perimeter before extending into the awaiting mouth. Sam let out a purr, and Alex's heart swelled with pride.

"Tell me you're mine," the dark-haired beauty whispered into Samantha's ear.

"I'm yours, my Princess Charming, and I'll be home before this outfit turns back into rags." She gave Alex one last hug before pulling away. "I had best be going. Do you want to walk me downstairs?"

Her first reaction was to say no. Even though she knew how much Samantha loved her, she did not want to see her walking out the door with a man on her arm. Second instinct told her that it would be best to be there by her lover's side, letting the young man know that Samantha was spoken for, at least that she had someone waiting at home for her.

"Sure, I'll walk you down, come on."

The initial meeting was a little hard for Alex to stomach, but she had to remember that this person had once been a friend of her Samantha's and would take the liberties that any friend would normally take. After all, she never shuddered when Sonny gave Sam a welcoming hug

and kiss. *Come on, Alex, you know that's not the same type of situation.* At any rate she withstood the meeting anew and wished them a good evening as she watched her heart walk off with another person at her side.

Turning back from the door, she walked into her office and tried to busy herself with paperwork, anything to keep from thinking of Samantha having a good time without her.

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It was almost eleven by the time the cleaning people finished. Alex locked up everything but the front doors and took the elevator up to the third floor. Because she hadn't secured the front, she left the intercom on so she could police the area. At least that was the intellectual reasoning behind leaving the sound on so she could hear any noise in the Center.

A glass of wine later she heard Samantha's laughter ringing through the front hallway.

"I had a lovely dinner, Shawn, other than your trying to talk me into leaving California. It was really good seeing you again. You'll be sure to tell you parents I said hello?"

"Yeah, I will. I had a great time, too, Sammie, and I'm sorry I couldn't convince you that you belong back in Washington." He paused in the conversation to collect his thoughts, "Do you think you could show me around the Center a little?"

"I thought you already had the VIP tour this evening, while you were waiting for me to come down?"

"One of the employees started to show me around, but we didn't get very far before you made your timely entrance." He gave her his most charming smile. "The gym area looked interesting, but I didn't get to see it all. You seem to have all the most up-to-date equipment."

"Yes, Alex has a knack for setting up businesses like this. It's what she did, sometimes still does, for a living. All her experience surely came in handy when she began furnishing this place."

"Enough talk about Alex, Samantha. Do you know that half your conversation at dinner revolved around your roommate?" There was an edge of jealousy to the man's tone.

Alex beamed at the acknowledgement of that statement. *Guess I'm around even when I'm not.* She thought about not eavesdropping any longer, but then thought a second time and decided to continue listening in on the conversation. His asking for a second tour was not sitting right with the ebony-haired beauty, and she wanted to make sure that Samantha was able to handle the advance she was certain he was going to make.

She watched the heat sensors as the couple moved from the front of the building over toward the climbing wall. She listened as Samantha told Shawn about her first attempt at climbing, conspicuously leaving out what happened after she fell. She didn't expect Samantha to go into

every detail and had to be content with the fact that she did mention getting caught instead of falling on the mat.

Shawn grunted at the end of the story and mumbled something inaudible. "Want to take a swim in the pool?" he asked.

"Do you have a suit?" Samantha questioned.

"No, but there's no one but the two of us . . . "

"I don't think that would be appropriate, Shawn. Maybe it's time for you to go; I have an early schedule tomorrow." As usual, Samantha was her gracious self, ignoring the implication that had just been thrown at her.

"How about a look at the gym before I do," Shawn insisted.

"Okay, but then I think we should call it an evening."

Again Alex watched the screen as the two walked from the east side of the building to the west. She could see that he was bridging the distance between them and watched as he tried to put an arm around her lover's shoulder. Her blood began to boil, but she stood her ground, knowing that Samantha would quickly put him in his place.

One smooth move and the blonde had thrown the offending arm off her shoulder. "If you can't behave yourself, the tour will end right here and now."

Shawn gave her a wide grin, and she returned his look with a frown. "I mean it, Shawn. I'm in no mood to fend you off. We parted friends once before, and I would like for us to do the same tonight."

"What if I want to be more than a friend, Samantha?"

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

"Because it is!"

"That's no explanation, and you know it. Give me a real reason why I should not pursue this area of our relationship?"

"For one, **we** don't have a relationship, Shawn. We never have, and we never will. And more importantly, I'm already seriously involved with someone else, as if it's any of your business."



"What, with that dyke upstairs? Samantha why don't you just cooperate and admit that she's just an experiment, something to irritate your father and get his attention? It's time to stop making everyone's life miserable."

Alex could hear Samantha's intake of breath and could almost envision the look on her lover's face. Every nerve in her body told her to start for the ground floor, but she remained plastered to the area in front of the security panel.

By this time they were standing over by the gym mats. "Shawn, you don't have any idea what you're talking about and . . . how did you know about Alex and me?"

She was staring at the friend who was quickly becoming a threat, trying to conjure what she was going to say next to make him leave without starting a fight, yet wanting to know what had been said about her and Alex to him.

"I have my sources. Come on, Samantha, you're more of a woman than that," he snarled. "You can't possibly be satisfied sexually with another woman. I know it must have been a great turn-on to have someone as beautiful as Alex interested in you. I get turned on trying to imagine the two of you in bed together, but you've got to miss having something warm and throbbing inside you." He grabbed her hand and spun her around, catching her off balance.

"Something like this," he placed her hand on his swollen member. "We never did get to consummate our relationship, Samantha. But there's no time like the present. You've got me so hot just thinking about it that I can almost feel myself inside you." He pushed himself into her hand with a gyrating motion. "Come on, baby, give us a chance."

"Damn it, Shawn, leave me alone!" Unbidden tears stung her eyes as she tried to pull her hand away, but he twisted her wrist and brought her down to her knees. All her practice at martial arts was turning out to be no help at all with this surprise attack. She was wishing for all she was worth that Alex had gone to dinner with them. This would never be happening if she had.

"That's a good position for you, Sammie," Shawn growled with a hint of bitterness in his voice. He hadn't expected his overtures to be so vehemently refused. "How about a little taste of something better than pussy? I can't imagine you not liking it more. "

By this time Alex was in the elevator. It had been stationed on the third floor, so no time was wasted awaiting its arrival. She punched the ground floor button and cursed the decision she had made to refuse to go to dinner with Samantha and the asshole who was trying to defile her.

Shawn pushed Sam down on the mat and straddled her. Placing one hand on each of her arms, he slowly slid his body down hers until they were face to face. He tried kissing her and his breath reeked of the alcohol he had consumed during dinner. Flailing her head from side to side she started to scream, but he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and placed it in her mouth, laughing at her attempts to push him off of her.

"Why are you fighting me, Samantha? I'm better for you than a stinking dyke. You don't realize what you're missing; you just haven't had the right man, yet."

With his full weight inhibiting her every move, he started to unzip his pants, all the while telling her how much he would enjoy putting his dick into her mouth. "But, I can't take that chance now can I, Sammie," he whispered into her ear. "And, of course, I wouldn't want to have to hurt you. I'll just have to settle for fucking you. But I promise to make you come better than any goddamn lesbian ever could."

Samantha's attempts to wiggle out from under the obnoxious man were futile.

Seeming to like the sound of his own voice, Shawn continued taunting her. "Admit you're hot for me, too, Sammie. Tell me you miss having a cock between your legs." Twisting slightly, he slid a hand under Samantha's pants and panties, his fingers lingering in the curly golden locks of her mound.

Before he could go any further, he felt a strong grasp on the mid section of his back and on his collar and found himself being pulled off Samantha and tossed almost effortlessly into the air. He landed on his back, totally winded.

"You okay, Samantha?" Alex asked, pulling the smaller woman off the mat, yanking the cloth from her lover's mouth, and holding her close.

"I am now," Samantha answered, relieved.

"Good." Alex gave her a quick kiss on the head before leaving her side to finish what she had just begun with the offender.

Before Samantha had a chance to react, the brunette was standing in front of a stunned Shawn. She felt more like a vigilante than a hero, but this asshole needed to be taught a lesson.

"I don't know who the Hell you think you are or what you thought you were doing, but this is my home, and that's my spouse you were messing with."

He was now sitting on the ground with his head between his legs. Alex pulled him by the hair into a standing position and at the same time brought a knee up to meet with his quickly deflating erection.

"Damn," he screamed, trying unsuccessfully to grab his crotch and protect his face at the same time. His knees buckled and tears streamed down his face, then Alex's fist made contact with his nose.

Blood spurted from the obviously broken appendage, and the man dropped to the floor in utter agony.

"Not much of a fighter now are you, lover?" Alex growled through clenched teeth. "How's it feel getting beaten up by a 'stinking dyke,' Shawn?"

"Stop it, Alex!" Samantha screamed above the outcry of the injured man. "You're going to kill him." She wedged herself between Shawn and Alex. Placing her hands on the taller woman's shoulders as she tried to reason with her. "He's not worth getting yourself in trouble, Alex. Please, stop."

"Can't do that right now, Samantha, sorry. This fucker's going to think twice before trying anything like that ever again," Alex vowed as she picked Sam up and moved her out of the way. "I'll handle this my way, Samantha." Eyes, as cold as ice, looked from her lover back to the man sitting on the floor, holding his face and bleeding all over his hands.

"Let me call 911," Samantha pleaded. "They'll take care of him."

"No!" Shawn screamed between gasps of anguish.

"You," Alex yelled, glaring at Shawn, "give me **one** fucking reason why I shouldn't continue to be the shit out of you, and **then** turn you over to the police!"

"Because . . ." he answered, not knowing which part of his injured body to try to protect from the infuriated brunette towering over him.

"I'm listening." Alex accentuated her sentence with a kick in his ribs.

A guttural exhalation was the only sound that escaped from the wounded man's lips. With as deep a breath as he could take without instigating more pain, he tried desperately to blurt out an explanation, before Alex decided to strike him again. "This . . . wasn't . . . my idea," he gulped. "I . . . I was hired."

Alex turned to Samantha, who was standing with her mouth agape; then she turned back to Shawn. "Okay, so who paid you, *as if I don't already know*, and what exactly were you paid to do?"

"Don Riley. He called me." Shawn's sentences were curt and choppy. Taking a large breath, he attempted to clarify his actions in one fast sentence. "He gave me \$1,000 before I left Washington and told me if I succeeded in getting Samantha away from you, he would give me \$2,000 more when I returned and help set me up in a business."

"Oh, and you thought that your debonair approach would win her heart, and she would follow you back to Daddy?"

"I didn't mean for it to end like this," he was almost crying. "I hadn't intended to . . . I don't know what happened. I don't know what got into me."

"I do." Blue blades focused on his deflated manhood. Alex continued to scowl at the subjugated person sitting on the floor in front of her. "How's that throbbing between your legs?" she snarled. "You know, I ought to beat you senseless, just because I can."

Looking up into Alex's angered face, he begged, "Oh, God, please . . . don't hit me again! I'm sorry, Ms. Dorian, truly I am." He placed his arms in front of him to fend off imaginary strikes. "I was just trying to . . ."

"I know what you were **trying** to do." Alex grabbed him by the shirt. His hands inadequately attempted to slap her away from him. As a strong right arm swung back to deliver another blow to the already bloodied face, a small hand covered her fist.

"Please, Alex, enough. This is no solution. Look at him. He's pitiful!"

Still furious, Alex jerked her arm away from Samantha's touch determined to continue her attack.

"Alex, p-l-e-a-s-e," Samantha pleaded one more time.

The tone in Sam's voice finally penetrated Alex's wrath, and she stopped focusing on Shawn long enough to notice the expression on her soulmate's face. Shaking her head, she released her hold on the frightened man and pushed him roughly down onto the floor. "You certainly owe Samantha a thank you, mister," she hissed.

Sad green eyes looked from the broken man to the woman she loved. "We're all pawns in this charade, Alex. My father's the real villain, and he's not here to take responsibility." Tears trickled down Samantha's face, melting her lover's rage.

Instinctively, Alex reached out to wipe away the dampness. "Don't cry, Honey . . ."

Sobbing, Samantha continued, "I know what Shawn did was wrong, and by the gods, Alex, I'm glad you came in when you did, but I don't want you to hurt him any more, and I don't want to continue this discussion any longer." She turned to walk away.

"No!" Alex responded, stopping Samantha in her footsteps. "No. This needs to be discussed."

A puzzled look crossed Samantha's face as she turned and shrugged her shoulders. "The damage has already been done."

"Maybe so, but I want to know exactly what that asshole you're related to thought he would accomplish with this tactic." She turned to address the man who was riveted to the gym floor and afraid to move without being told to. "Get up, dip-shit, and fix you clothes. I won't hit you again, unless you do something else stupid to warrant it. By the way, you're lucky I didn't stuff this down your throat." She threw his handkerchief in his face and motioned for him to walk in the direction of the men's locker room. "Go on. It's time to get you cleaned up."

Giving him a push in the right direction, she motioned for Samantha to follow. When they got there she opened the door and nodded for Shawn to enter. "Make yourself presentable; we still have an explanation due us."

Alex placed an arm around Samantha's shoulders, and the two women stood watching as Shawn washed the blood off his hands and his bruised and swollen face.

While he was cleaning up, Samantha went and got some ice from the juice bar and brought it back wrapped in a paper towel. She handed it to him and he replaced the towel with his hanky. When he was finished the three of them walked in silence toward Alex's office.

Once inside, she opened the liquor cabinet and poured each of them a drink.

"Sit," the executive ordered the pitiful excuse for a man, as he stood in the middle of the room holding the make-shift ice pack on his broken nose.

He slowly lowered himself into a chair and gratefully took the drink offered him.

Samantha was the first to begin the discussion she had formerly announced she didn't want to have. "What did my father think he was going to accomplish by sending you down here to Laguna?"

"I guess he thought you'd come home, with the right encouragement." He shrugged and took another sip of his drink, avoiding eye contact with the women. "I ran into him about a week ago, and he said that ever since he found out that you had become a lesbian, his life has been going down the tubes. He blames all his misfortunes on you and Ms. Dorian . . ."

"Okay, I'm tired of the Ms. Dorian stuff, you might as well call me Alex," the brunette responded in a gruff tone.

He nodded his head and continued. "Don really hates you . . . Alex. He condemns you for not only taking Samantha away but for all sorts of business failures. He said all he wants to do with his life is to make yours as miserable as you've made his."

The sorrowful expression on Samantha's face as she spoke made Alex want to weep. "I'm sorry, Alex, that doesn't even sound like the man who raised me. I don't know when he became so bitter, but after what happened here tonight, I don't trust him not to hurt Mom, or even Sally. If he would pay someone to molest me and drag me back to Washington, there's nothing I would put past him."

"I agree with you, Samantha, but I don't think we should be deliberating about family situations with Shawn here; after all he was the one who tried to rape you."

"For all it's worth," Shawn interjected, "Don doesn't have much affection for any of the women in his family." He winced at the pain caused simply by talking, but he went on. "He was trying to figure out a way to divorce his wife without giving her half of everything he owned. He said she

didn't deserve anything, that she was nothing but a lazy sow, and since the children were grown there was nothing of any importance for her to live for, especially since all she delivered were girl children. I'm sorry I went along with him, it was really stupid of me. I honestly didn't start out to hurt Samantha; things just got out of hand. Not that it's any excuse, but I think I had too much to drink at dinner . . . of course I'm more than sober now."

Alex stood looking out at the ocean, trying to fix the situation firmly in her mind and come up with a solution. Finally, not turning from the window, she spoke. "Shawn, if you want to rectify yourself in Samantha's eyes and keep me from haunting you for the rest of your life," steel blue eyes turned in his direction, "and believe me, I could very well do that, I suggest that you go back to that poor excuse for a human being and tell him you tried your utmost, but that Samantha is very happy where she is. Don't make a big deal of anything, and don't discuss with him the fiasco that occurred here this evening. You got that?"

She looked at Samantha and received a nod of approval.

"Now, I suggest you say goodbye to Samantha. Be happy that I didn't beat you to a pulp when I had the chance and that we didn't have you arrested. I can't say it was a pleasure to meet you, Shawn, but it's good to know just how vindictive Don has become." Again, she turned toward the ocean, dismissing the younger man with an aristocratic air.

Almost afraid to say anything, he looked at Samantha and mouthed the words I'm sorry. She shrugged her shoulders and told him that she was sorry, too; sorry that the evening had gotten so ugly and sorry she had trusted him.

"I'll show myself out, Sammie." Brown puppy dog eyes, surrounded by purple bruising and accented with a swollen nose, looked into the eyes of an old friend and saw nothing but disgust. "Again, I'm sorry I was such a fool," he muttered as he walked toward the door.

Almost as an afterthought, he turned back around, gathered all the courage he could muster, and addressed the two women in the room. "I hope some day you can both find it in your hearts to forgive me." Receiving no answer, he turned and walked out the door.

The room was still and the sound of the ocean crashing on the shore far below could be heard through the vented window slots.

"I should have gone with you," Alex mumbled. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't been . . ."

"That's not true, Alex." Samantha walked to the window and stood beside her lover, putting an arm around the taller woman's waist and resting her head on Alex's chest. "Remember you once told me that everything happens for a reason? I had thought the exact same thing some time earlier during this disastrous evening, but you know what?"

"What?"

"If tonight hadn't happened like it did, I would never have believed in my heart that my father had turned into such an evil person. What scares me even more is the reaction you had tonight. You could have killed him, Alex, especially with all your martial arts training."

"At one point I wanted to kill him, Samantha. What he did was despicable! He deserved more of a beating than he received at my hands."

"But, Alex, you scared me. You were out of control."

"I'm sorry, Samantha, but if I had been truly out of control, Shawn would not have walked out of this building on his own two feet. I told you no one messes with my world and gets away with it. I'm afraid that's a part of me that's too ingrained to change in the short amount of time we've known each other. And to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I would like to totally change it; it's my defense against your being hurt."

Samantha gently traced the outline of her lover's cheek with her fingers, running them slowly over a frown that changed upon her touch into a small smile. "I love you, Alex. I wouldn't have wanted to see you being the one hauled off to jail for killing him; he's not worth it. And now, I have more problems to worry about. I need to get my mother and sister away from my dad as quickly as possible. I no longer care what happens to him, and if you can ruin him financially, all the better."

"If anger is one of the deadly sins, Samantha, vengeance is even worse, and it doesn't sound good coming from you. On the other hand, I totally agree with getting Sally and your mom away from him as quickly as we can manage it. Finish your drink, and let's go upstairs."

Minutes later they were in the apartment. Alex finished locking up and securing the Center below them.

"Want to join me in a warm bath, Alex? I feel dirty."

"You have no cause to feel that way, Honey, you did nothing wrong. But to answer your question, yes, I'd love to join you."

Warm water, soft bubbles, and sweet smelling candles helped to cleanse away the physical and emotional bruises that had been received during the ordeal. Samantha sat with her back to Alex, her partner's strong arms were wrapped around her, holding her close. There would be no making love tonight; the gravity of the situation they had just been through made sure of that. But it didn't stop the lovers from sharing this quiet time of reflection.

All Samantha wanted to do was to be held safe in Alex's grasp.

All Alex wanted to do was shelter and insulate the woman she loved more than life itself and keep her safe from further atrocities. She didn't know why they were being put through such trials, but she knew that protecting Samantha was her responsibility.

When Alex started complaining about "pruning," they drained the water and extinguished the candles. The softness and warmth of the bed was a comfort to the lovers as they crawled in next to each other. Words were unnecessary, and silence acted as a buffer between what had happened earlier and the serenity of being together.

Alex realized that Samantha needed to be comforted by the security of knowing she was safe.

Samantha wanted nothing more than to crawl inside Alex's skin and escape forever from the hurt of the world around her. She thought she had been making great strides in self-preservation, but tonight's dramatic episode proved that she still had a long way to go.

While in the tub, she had questioned Alex as to how she knew there was trouble on the first floor. Her hero's answer, as usual, made perfect sense, even though Samantha felt there had been a dual reason for the security registers being on. In essence, it really didn't matter; the only important fact was that her champion had arrived in time, and for that she would always be grateful.

Now the difficult task of dealing with her father lay ahead of them. Alex had taken all of Samantha's problems on as her own and in return had given her hope for a positive future for her mother and sister. Sam didn't know what she had done to deserve such a caring soulmate but was certain that she would spend the rest of her life making sure Alex knew how much she was loved.

"You're awfully quiet, my Destiny, whatcha thinking?"

"Oh, I'm just thankful to be here in your arms. I never feel safer than when you're wrapped around me. And, I guess I was thinking about how lucky I am to have you in my life, to help me with all these problems."

"I'm all for praise, Samantha, but I think you're forgetting that you didn't have all these problems until I came into your life."

"Actually, Alex, I really didn't have much of a life at all until you became a part of it. The problems would have surfaced somewhere along the line, perhaps from a different cause, but they would have reared their ugly heads just the same; I'm sure of it. Having you in my life makes them less distasteful and easier to work with."

"As much as we hate these trials we're put through, we've got to admit that it makes us stronger. Hate's tough on the soul, Samantha, but the more outside forces try to tear us apart, the closer we become. I know he's your father, and I know what I told you about retaliation, but I swear by the Goddess-he will pay for his indiscretion this time."

"By the way, Alex, I've made one decision that I promise to stick with-I am definitely going to stay away from the gym at night unless you're by my side."



Blue eyes glistened as starlight shimmered into the bedroom, creating an almost mystical appearance to the room. A smile lit up Alex's beautiful face. "I think that's a very wise decision, Samantha; now get some sleep."

"Hey," Samantha looked up into Alex's face. "Did I hear you call me your spouse?"

"Yes. What did you want me to call you, my girlfriend?"

"No, it's just the first time I've ever heard you use that term."

The only answer she received was a hug and a kiss on the top of her head.

"Alex, tell me again how you felt when you first saw me on the beach, clamming with Suz."

"Don't you ever get tired of hearing that, Samantha?"

"No," came the whispered response.

Alex could hear the smile in her lover's voice.

"It always makes me feel warm inside when you tell me, and I need to feel that right now."

"Okay," Alex conceded. "I can remember thinking that you were like a breath of fresh air that swept over the coastline bringing with you splashes of sunshine. Your laughter danced on the wind and caught in my heart, making me wish I could be your friend so that I would know that same happiness."

"That's beautiful," the exhausted blonde mumbled as she surrendered to sleep.

*Yes, Samantha, you are beautiful. Glancing toward the heavens the brunette said a short prayer. Thank you, Goddess, for allowing me to intervene before too much damage had been done. Please, always make sure that I'm by her side whenever she's in danger. I'll be eternally grateful.*

She kissed her lover softly on the head before closing her own eyes. The expenditure of adrenaline, the wine and warm bath, and now laying here with Sam in her arms was comforting enough to send her quickly to the land of dreams. She would tackle their obstacles in the morning; tonight she just wanted to sleep and dream of an idyllic life with Samantha.

Continued in Part 18.

# ~ Sedona Rain ~

by Carole Giorgio

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

**Love/Sex Warning/Disclaimer:** This story is about love and an explicit 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, California with a few trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished for the reader's enjoyment. 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 friend and editor, Jeanne 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 and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a sequel!

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## Part 18

### Chapter 18

Not counting Saturday, there were only two more working days in the week. Alex was hoping she could begin formulating a plan to destroy Don Riley and have it set into motion before Monday. She never did have much patience when it came to affairs of the heart. She would call in all the business favors due her, if need be, to make sure that he felt the entire scope of her reach and her wrath. *I'll show you the basis of 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' You will rue the day you butted heads with me, Don Riley, **and** the day you broke your daughter's heart with your prejudice and ignorance.*

Samantha was still asleep and Alex decided to give her a break and let her continue doing so until she woke up on her own. There was nothing that needed doing today that couldn't wait until the blonde was fully rested from the ordeal of the evening before.

Alex still couldn't understand how a father could be so cruel to his own child. Her father had, by design, been absent most of her life, but she knew she held a special place in Al's heart and that he would never knowingly hurt her. It was his love for her mom's that had instigated his even

being involved her in her conception. She realized, also, that she didn't have the problem of sexual orientation to deal with from any of the people her family. Had she grown up to be straight, she knew that all three of her parents would have loved her just as much as they did now, and all would have been happy that she found love in a world so void of it.

Her heart felt heavy when she thought about how she had let Shawn slither away with little to no punishment, but she would be damned if she would allow Don the same leniency. It was to her advantage that the bonds between Sheila, Sally, and Don were already breaking down; it would make it that much easier to accomplish her revenge. Her plan involved no physical violence, so she wasn't sure she needed to discuss it with Samantha. But after battling with her conscience, Samantha's hero decided that she would formulate everything, get it all in place, and then run it by her lover before actually instigating the retaliation.

Showering always seemed to be conducive to clear thinking, and this morning was no exception. First on her agenda was to place some phone calls to old colleagues. Alex laughed to herself and shook her head at the visions running around inside her brain while she finished brushing her teeth and combing her hair. She kept thinking that she would love to be able to astral project herself to Don's side when his world started falling apart. Her adrenaline was pumping, and she felt the old surge of competition ignite a spark within her that she thought had been extinguished.

Coming out of the bathroom, Alex smiled as she looked over at her sleeping beauty. Sam hadn't moved from her position on the bed the entire time the brunette bathed and dressed, except to grab Alex's pillow and wrap her arms around it.

Before leaving the bedroom, Alex wrote a note and posted it to the mirror-*See you when you get up, Sweetheart. I'll more than likely be in my office. Love you, Me.* She blew a kiss in the direction of the sleeper and marched into the kitchen for something to eat and drink.

The Center was still quiet when she arrived downstairs, so before heading for her sanctuary, she unlocked the doors and was greeted by the first of the employees, who were patiently waiting for one of the key-carrying supervisors to arrive.

Minutes later she was sitting behind her desk organizing her strategy. Carrying out her plan was easier to accomplish once she was in the confines of her office; all her business numbers were stored on the computer there. Her heart actually felt lighter after speaking to a couple of the executives from Have It All. More than a few of the now top execs in the company had had dealings with Riley on their way up the corporate ladder. No one liked him very much, and his arrogance was well known in the field. They both were more than willing to offer Alex all the help she needed in bringing about his demise. She asked one of the men she had personally helped to promote, Phil Counsile, to fax her a copy of all the accounts they had "allowed" ZZ Medi-aide to win, accounts they really hadn't wanted to take the time to fight for. Phil told Alex that he would go her one better. They had kept a separate file on Don Riley and the accounts they had crossed paths with the man to either get or not get. If Alex wanted just Riley's files and those of the salesmen directly under him, she would have them by the end of the afternoon. Ecstatic, Alex took her headset off and clapped her hands. She stood, turned around, stretched, and gazed

through the window at the rippling waves, the tips of which were sparkling with specks of gold from the morning sunlight. *Yes, this is definitely going to be a productive day!*

Looking at the clock, she saw that it was almost ten and Samantha hadn't made an appearance. It was definitely time to take a break and go see if Sam was still sleeping or if she just didn't feel like coming down to the Center this morning. It wasn't like Samantha not to at least call if she wasn't coming, so Alex assumed that her lover was still in dreamland.

When the elevator door opened on the third floor, Alex knew immediately that Samantha was awake. The aroma of breakfast strips and coffee pleasantly assaulted her nostrils.

"I hope you're not planning on consuming whatever it is you are cooking all by yourself," the executive announced as she entered the apartment and then the kitchen.

"Absolutely not," came the instant reply, as the blonde turned from the stove to smile at her lover. "You must have radar. I was just getting ready to call and tell you it was time for a mid-morning break. I figured there wasn't anything pressing for me to accomplish this morning or you would have had me up and showering before you left the apartment."

"You've got me all figured out," Alex responded, walking over and putting her arms around the smaller woman's waist. "This doesn't seem to be an important day for working, and you looked so peaceful sleeping with your arms wrapped around my pillow that I couldn't bring myself to wake you up." She grabbed a piece of the meat substitute and popped it into her mouth before getting her hand slapped.

"Can't you wait?"

"Nope." Alex smiled as she reached for another, knowing that she would never get away with grabbing two. She put her hands up in an *I give up* gesture and kissed Samantha on the cheek. "Want me to pour the tea?"

"Please. Doing something helpful will keep you out of harm's way, and I'll be able to finish cooking. I'm just about done, so you can sit down after you put the juice and silverware on the table."

"How ya doing this morning, Samantha?" Alex queried, trying to catch the first expression that crossed her partner's face.

"Okay, Alex." She looked at her lover and saw pain in the sapphire blue eyes. "Really, I'm okay," she reiterated, nodding her head. "I probably should have expected something like . . ."

"Don't even finish that sentence! There is no way in hell you should have **expected** anything of the kind. I guess what I really want to know is if you're still mad enough to want a bit of payback?"

"You're not going to have him physically hurt, are you Alex?"

The grimace on Samantha's face reinforced what the brunette already knew in her heart; there would be no dealing with Don on a physical level. She would have to get him in his pocketbook.

"No, Honey, I'm not, but you need to call your sister today and tell her what happened here last night."

Silence engulfed the room.

Alex finished placing the juice on the table and walked back into the kitchen, taking Sam in her arms. "Talking about it can't be pleasant, Samantha, but the sooner you contact your sister . . ."

"I know, Alex. Can we eat a nice breakfast first?"

"Most definitely." She kissed Samantha on the head and squeezed her tightly. "Want me to go sit down?"

"Yeah, but you can take these with you." Samantha handed Alex both of their plates and then grabbed the one piled with pancakes.

Even though they tried to keep the conversation cheerful, hints of what had happened the night before continued to creep into the breakfast chatter. Tears occasionally mingled with syrup, but by the time the two had finished eating, Samantha could talk about the incident without crying.

Alex told her to forget work for the day. There was nothing pressing happening down in the Center and taking care of personal business was more important. On a lighter note, she mentioned that she didn't want Sam frightening the clients away with her swollen eyes.

"Do I look that bad?" Samantha questioned.

"No! I'm only kidding with you to get you to feel better."

"Oh, then smile when you say things like that."

Alex gave the smaller woman a kiss good-bye and a thank you for a great brunch before heading back down to the office. "I'll expect a full report when I come back up." She turned and left the apartment.

Samantha gathered up the dishes and piled them on the counter, her eyes again filling with tears as she ran over in her mind what she would say to Sally about what had transpired the evening before. She decided to make the call while she felt brave and left the dishes for later. Instead of dialing Sally's work number, she inadvertently dialed her home phone.

After four rings, Samantha realized that she had dialed the wrong number and was just about to hang up when Sally answered. With resolve Sam pushed aside her inclination to hang up anyway and call back later and instead spoke in a soft voice to her sister.

"Hi, Sally. What are you doing home on a Monday?"

"Hi, to you, too, Sammie, and what are you doing calling me at home on a Monday if you thought I wasn't going to be here?" Sally answered her sister with a question of her own and a giggle in her tone.

"Actually, I dialed the number out of habit," Samantha answered, relaxing a little at the sound of her sister's voice.

"Okay, I'll buy that. So, what's up?"

There was an awkward silence on the phone line.

Realizing that it was unlike her sister to be so quiet, Sally took the lead and started the conversation.

"Now you have me worried, Sammie. Why the silent treatment?"

"I was just trying to figure out how to start the conversation. It's not one I relish having over the phone, but I have no other choice."

"Gosh! Is something wrong with Alex? Did something happen between you two? I know, you had your first fight!"

"No, Sally, it has nothing to do with Alex. She's fine. I'm fine. We're fine. This has to do with Daddy."

The tremor in Samantha's voice did not escape her sister's ear.

"Daddy? Come on, Samantha, the easiest way to breach what can only be a horrible topic is to open your mouth and spill it all out as quickly as possible. You know, like we used to do when we were kids. Don't breathe until the entire situation is expelled."

Even though Sally was trying to make it easier for her big sis, she knew that the news was not going to be something easy to swallow. Her father had been acting terrible at home over the past month, and whatever Samantha had to reveal was probably the culmination of whatever it was that was making him such a bastard.

Samantha took a deep breath and tried to focus all her energy on doing exactly what Sally had suggested. "I think I told you when I talked to you that I was going to have dinner with Shawn McDouglas when he was down here on business. Well, anyway, I did. We came back to the Center afterward, and I started to show him around downstairs. He started talking about my coming back home, and then he made a pass at me. When I refused him, he got obnoxious. He called Alex a dyke. One thing led to another, and before I knew it he had me down on the gym floor, trying to rape me." She could hear Sally gasp on the other end of the phone line, but continued quickly before she lost her nerve. "Alex came down and beat the shit out of him. In the

middle of everything he blurted out that the entire setup was Daddy's idea. It was horrible, Sally. I didn't realize up until that point that Daddy hated me so much."

"Goddamn son of a bitch," Sally hissed.

Samantha breathed deeply and exhaled. "Yeah."

"Are you okay, Sammie? Physically, I mean?"

"Yeah, the hurt is definitely more emotional."

"I can imagine," her sister agreed.

Samantha continued to fill Sally in on everything that Shawn had told them, and by the end of the conversation Sally had promised to go to their parent's house as soon as she got off the phone with Samantha and tell their mother what had happened.

"I can't decide what I hate him for the most, Sam," Sally blurted out when her sister was finished with her story. "Damn him! And the nerve of him trying to cut Mom out of what she deserves for having stayed by his slimy side all these years."

"As far as the divorce goes," Samantha interjected, "when Mom decides to file, that is, Alex has offered to have her lawyers represent her."

"I think Mom will appreciate the offer, Samantha. It will take one heavy load off her shoulders. I don't know how she will ever repay Alex . . ."

"No need, Sally . . . we're all family now and Alex even said they're on retainers. They get paid whether they work or not, and she figured this would give them something to work on."

"Are they divorce lawyers, Samantha?"

"I don't know; I only know that if they're attorneys for the Dorians they have clout and they are the best that money can buy. If Alex thinks they can handle the case, I'm sure they can."

"I suppose you're right. Mom's been ready to leave him longer than either of us ever expected; it's just that she has been dependent on him for so many years, she's afraid to venture out on her own. It's funny in a way; she raised us to think for ourselves and to go after what we wanted out of life, the two things she never had instilled in her."

"It's never too late to learn, Sally, and Mom's a quick learner. Alex and I have even talked about having Mom open a New Age-type of store here in Laguna if she wants to get away from Dad. We think it would be successful here, and it would give Mom some self-confidence as well as making her a decent living without her having to rely on Dad for anything."

"We can talk about that later, Samantha; we need to take one thing at a time. For now, it's letting Mom know what happened to you last night and who instigated the sordid affair. I can almost guarantee that that, coupled with Alex's offer of legal help, will encourage Mom to get her act together and leave that son of a bitch."

"Listen, before I hang up, there's one other thing I want you and Mom to think about. You have both been invited to spend Thanksgiving with us at Alex's parent's house in La Jolla."

"Sammie . . . I don't know what to . . ."

"Just ask Mom as soon as you can and get back to me. I'd like to give them an answer before the nineteenth."

"Okay, Samantha. I'll get back to you on that. I'm hoping she'll have him move out of the house, but I'm afraid he's going to throw a fit about that after all you've told me tonight."

"Again, Sally, that's where the lawyers come in. They can advise Mom on what to do. Have her call me, or you call, whichever she feels more comfortable with, and we'll take it from there."

A few more repartees passed between the sisters before they finally said good-bye, with the promise to be back in touch with each other by the beginning of the following week.

Samantha hung up the phone and sighed. She could make it through the weekend before hearing what her Mother had decided about how and when to finally leave her father. Waiting a few more days would be an easy accomplishment after having realized that the end was positively in sight for a marriage that had long outlasted its viability.

The kitchen was once again clean, and the blonde had been sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, watching the ocean as it ebbed and flowed in a hypnotizing cadence. She shook herself out of her reverie and called Alex to fill her in on how most of the conversation with Sally had gone, including the discussion about the lawyers. Alex announced that she would call the attorneys immediately and ready them for an assignment she was sure would turn nasty. The executive then promised to be finished with work by six, adding that the other therapist and Angel could have the responsibility of closing up the Center.

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The aroma of an Italian deli drifted through the air, as Alex exited the elevator on the third floor.

"I didn't know you had Italian in your bloodline," Alex commented after passing through the already open apartment door.

"I'm sure somewhere down the line I had Roman blood in one of my incarnations," Samantha replied smiling. "Or perhaps I was a Greek poet and got to venture to the land of pasta and vino occasionally to trade with famous chefs, bartering recipes for odes."



Laughing at Samantha's quick wit, Alex entered the kitchen and took the wooden spoon out of the smaller woman's hand. She spun her around and kissed her passionately.

"I've been waiting all afternoon to come home and do that."

"Hmmm," was the only response she received from her lover, other than a huge grin and slight tilt of her head.

While Alex continued to hold Samantha close, she looked eagerly over the smaller woman's shoulder at the pot on the stove.

"I love pasta, and this smells fantastic!"

"It's one of my specialties. If you're wondering why you don't see the spaghetti, it's because I made lasagna." She pulled away from her lover's arms to open the oven and pull out a pan of food fit for the gods.

"And we eat when?" Alex asked.

"As soon as you start the music and pour the wine," Samantha answered, pointing toward the dining area.

The brunette looked in the direction Samantha indicated to behold a fully dressed table.

"You can light the candles, also, if you want to," Samantha added. "I need to go powder my nose, then we can sit down and eat."

Dinner was elegant, and conversation for the most part was pleasant. Samantha wanted to put the memory of her telephone discussion with her sister out of her mind, if only for the rest of the evening. Tonight she just wanted to be with Alex and to forget that the rest of the world existed—especially Don Riley. In the light of day she would deal with whatever she needed to, but tonight she wanted to make believe that her hero had swept her away to a castle in the clouds where she would be protected from the evil villains of the world. Tonight she would drown herself in sapphire eyes kissed by starlight and lips that were as sweet as nectar.

Dinner had turned out to be everything Samantha had planned. The contented look on Alex's face as she savored the home-cooked meal and delivered constant compliments through nonverbal as well as verbal exclamations made all the time she'd spent in the kitchen more than worthwhile.

Sam got lost in her daydreams as she tried to imagine a more idyllic life than living on this cliff estate, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Try as she would, she couldn't. Here was where she wanted to remain forever, listening to soft music, drinking mellow wine, and dining on excellent food, with the added privilege of sharing the rest of her life with the gorgeous woman who sat across the table from her.

Alex spoke and her daydream ended.

Cleanup, they decided, would wait until morning. The table was abandoned, left cluttered with scraped clean but unwashed dishes. Samantha insisted on putting the perishables away while Alex readied the living room. The dark-haired beauty scattered pillows on the floor close to the floor-to-ceiling windows and then poured the remainder of the wine into their goblets.

The view from the penthouse beckoned the lovers. The movement of the waves caught the shimmering beams from the moon as they danced upon the water far below. To enhance the effects, the wind played a symphony that the lovers imagined as being composed for their ears only.

The day had been emotionally long and tiring for the small blonde, yet despite that, she had big plans in mind for the rest of the evening when she leaned back into Alex's chest. Her lover held her tightly as they continued to listen to the mesmerizing music of the waves, crashing on the shore far below. The last glass of wine she had consumed turned out to be less of an aphrodisiac and more of a sedative, and she soon fell sound asleep snuggled comfortably in the arms of love.

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The sun was beginning to streak through the bedroom windows when Samantha awoke with a start. She quickly sat up in bed and listened to the sound of the shower coming from the other room.

*Gods be damned, Alex, you let me fall asleep!* she cursed under her breath. *I had plans for last night.* "I had plans for last night," she repeated, screaming the words into the air.

"Did you say something?" Alex yelled from the bathroom as she turned off the running water.

"Nothing of any importance," Samantha mumbled. She let out her frustrations by hitting on the pillows before resigning herself to having missed the opportunity she had spent all of yesterday afternoon preparing for.

Continued in Part 19.