

Praise for the writing of Eve Vaughn

Blood Brothers 1: GianMarco's Muse

It held me page after page, making me forsake all other things I was supposed to do. It is an addictive page turner.

--Leyna, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Eve Vaughn is an author that entices and then drags the reader into the story. The sex scenes are so hot, they left me gasping for more.

-- Sheryl, *Coffee Time Romance*

Blood Brothers 2: Niccolo's Witch

Niccolo's Witch by Eve Vaughn hooked me from the first page... Blood Brothers is an excellent series and *Niccolo's Witch* delivers!

-- Delia, *Joyfully Reviewed*

Readers, run, don't walk, to purchase this book! I am sure you will appreciate this recommended read.

--Contessa ,*Fallen Angel Reviews*

Ms Vaughn has again written a story that captures the imagination and leaves the reader begging for more. I too will undoubtedly be waiting for more of the Grimaldi series, so don't wait, go out and get the books in this series today.

-- Sheryl,*EcataRomanceReviews*

GianMarco's *Muse* and *Niccolo's Witch* are now available from LooseId.

WILD WISHES:

TAG'S FOLLY

Eve Vaughn

www.loose-id.com

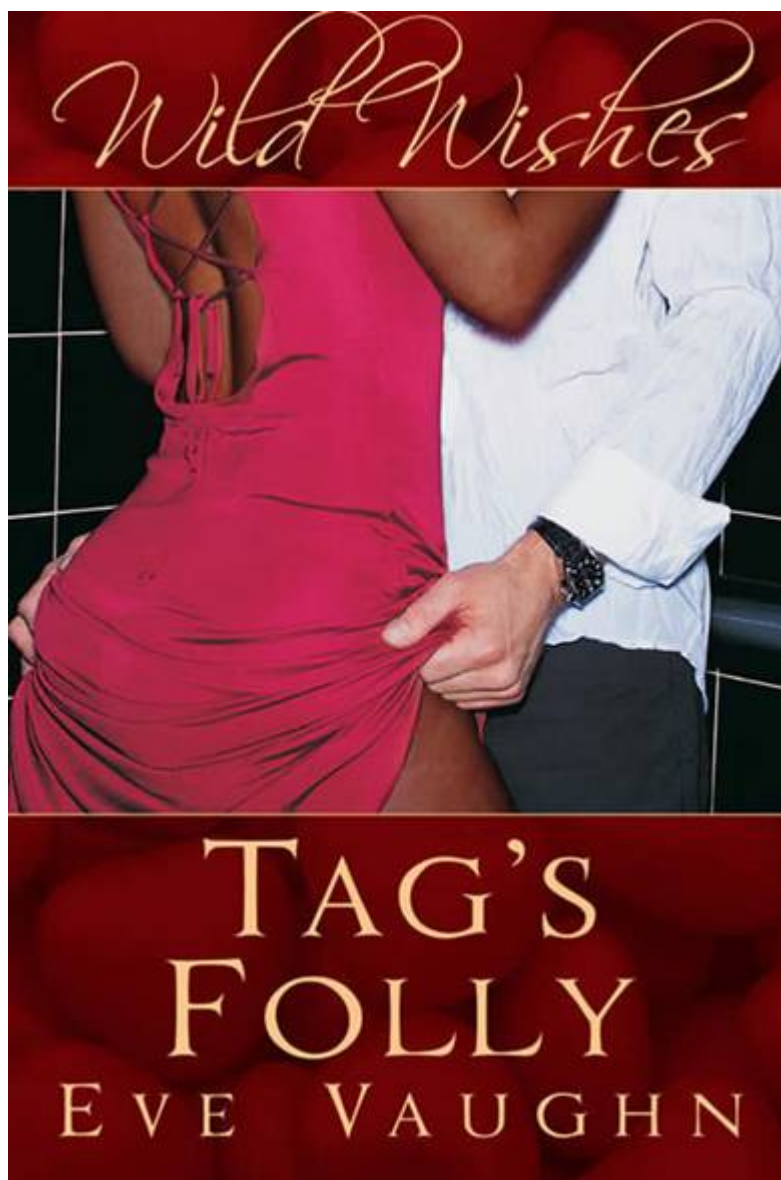
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This book is rated:

For explicit sexual content and graphic language.



Wild Wishes: Tag's Folly

Eve Vaughn

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my Valentine, Andrew

PROLOGUE

Tag leaned against the side of his office building and took one final drag of his cigarette, relishing the smoke that filled his lungs before exhaling. He casually tossed the butt on the ground and smashed it with his heel. He should quit. It was a nasty habit, but he justified it because he only smoked in times of stress. There were months where he didn't even think about lighting up, but lately it was becoming a crutch more often than he liked to think about.

His mind drifted to his live-in lover of the past twelve months. In his thirty-eight years, no woman had ever made him feel the way Alex did. She wasn't beautiful in the conventional sense, but she was definitely striking. With just one look from her exotically slanted, light brown eyes, his cock would jump to attention.

Alex knew exactly how to use her God-given gifts to her advantage and turned heads wherever she went with her soft, medium-brown skin, full, bow-shaped lips, and an ass so round and juicy it was perfect for riding. Tag loved fucking her from behind and smacking that luscious ass of her while pulling on her glossy, shoulder-length black hair.

It was always music to his ears to hear her scream and moan his name as his cock plowed into her. Tag also loved to run his lightly tanned hands over her dark body, the color contrasts of their skin adding yet another erotic element to their lovemaking. There was nothing Alex wouldn't let him do to her in bed. Nothing. She let him take her in any hole, in any position, and anywhere. Sexually, everything was perfect.

Their home life ran smoothly as well. She cooked all their meals, cleaned, never hassled him when he wanted to hang out with his friends, and watched sports with him. He wasn't one of those misogynistic men who thought it was a woman's place to do housework, but it just wasn't his thing, either. When she'd agreed to move into his townhouse, he'd offered to hire a permanent housekeeper instead of the one who only came by once a week, but Alex had insisted that she could do it herself.

Tag supposed she did spoil him. He liked coming home and inhaling the aroma of the fruity-scented candles she favored. He enjoyed partaking of her home-cooked meals, and had become accustomed to having freshly laundered clothes, all folded neatly in his drawers. To him, things already were perfect. Tag's philosophy in life was that if it wasn't broke, and then don't fix it.

But now Alex was driving him crazy. As far as he was concerned, things were in great working order. The problem was that Alex didn't think so. On the anniversary of her moving in with him, she had brought up the "M" word. It had been only the first in a long series of heated arguments, and the last one had been particularly nasty. Why did she have to get on this wedding kick? Damn it, *why* did she want to mess up a good thing?

No one knew more than Tag that matrimony didn't guarantee a happily-ever-after. Alex had argued that he couldn't possibly know since he'd never experienced it. Well, one didn't have to put their hand in fire to know that it was hot. His parents, sister, brother, friends -- all miserable, and marriage was the reason.

He fumbled with his lighter. When Tag looked up, he saw an old woman crossing the street just as a Mack truck was bearing down on her.

Holy shit!

He was a renowned plastic surgeon but knew that even he wouldn't be able to put that lady back together again if she got hit by that huge chunk of moving metal. He dropped his cigarettes and dashed into the street, grabbing the woman's arm and pulling her out of the truck's way even as its horns blared on the way past them. In the nick of time, thank God!

Their momentum sent the two of them flying to the ground. Tag immediately jumped back to his feet, holding out his hand to the elderly woman and helping her up. "Are you okay, ma'am?"

"Oh, my goodness, me! You saved my life." She was panting and seemed really shaken up, which was understandable, considering how close she'd come to death.

"It was nothing. Do you think you'll be okay? Maybe you should come up to my office and have a seat until you've had a chance to rest."

"You're such a nice young man." The woman looked up at him with a weather-beaten, wrinkled face, but her hazel eyes were surprisingly clear and youthful. They didn't seem to fit her old, old face. "Oh, no. I couldn't. I have to meet someone. I'll be fine." Her voice sounded young, too.

"Are you sure?" he asked, concerned. She appeared really feeble.

"Of course, but I must repay you for your kindness. My name is Psy -- I mean, Sally." She held out her frail-looking hand, which he immediately shook.

"You don't have to repay me, and I'd rather you didn't."

"But I must. My husband would be furious if he knew I was here like this."

"Really, ma'am, I don't need any kind of payment. Just knowing you're okay is rewarding enough."

Sally grabbed his wrist in a surprisingly tight grip. "I'm not what I appear to be. One wish. Anything you want will be yours. You just speak the words and I'll make it happen."

Chapter One

Alex stiffened when she heard Tag enter the bedroom. Usually, on the nights when he did pro bono work, she was asleep long before he arrived home, but tonight she was restless. It was hard to sleep when the man you loved and wanted to spend the rest of your life with thought you were good enough to fuck, but not good enough to marry.

He'd never come right out and said it, but what else could it be? Wasn't she the perfect partner? She cooked, cleaned, supported him, and hardly ever nagged. She was already performing the duties of a wife, so why the hell wouldn't he make things official? She knew he'd had reservations about their age difference, and though he never mentioned it, Alex often wondered how much race played a factor in his decision, too. Tag claimed that had nothing to do with anything, but it didn't stop her from thinking otherwise.

She'd come from a truly racially blended family with a full-blooded Sioux grandfather, a couple of white

aunts, a Latino uncle, and a handful of bi-racial cousins. Her family ranged from high yellow to coal black. There probably wasn't a more liberal family unit where race was concerned. Alex had dated black, white, Middle Eastern, and Asian men, but she'd never wanted to commit to any of them. Until Tag had come into her life.

Even now, just thinking about him made her pulse race. Her mind flicked back to the time they'd first met. When her then five-year-old niece, Tiffany, had been bitten in the face by the neighbor's rottweiler, the child's appearance had been dramatically altered. Alex's sister, Olivia, was just going through a divorce and money had been tight. Tiffany's medical expenses should have fallen under her father's insurance, but Bill had removed both her and Olivia from his policy.

Through a friend, they'd heard about a plastic surgeon who often did pro bono work and who could possibly help Tiffany. Alex had gone to the appointment with her sister and niece for moral support. And met Dr. Taggart Webster. She'd wanted him. Badly. When he'd smiled at them, revealing perfect white teeth, Alex had fallen head over heels. A quick scan of his left hand had thankfully revealed no rings or a telltale tan line.

He wasn't drop-dead gorgeous. He wasn't even particularly handsome, but something about him had attracted her and made him appear sexy as hell. Though he didn't possess the beauty of Brad Pitt or Colin Farrell, he had the type of rugged appeal that would make women give him a second look.

As far as Alex had been concerned, he was a powerful, rawboned work of art, just an inch shy of reaching six feet in height. A crop of short, blue-black hair had fallen carelessly over his forehead, as though he couldn't be bothered with a comb. On most men, it would have looked unkempt; on him, it worked. The harsh lines of his face and intensely black eyes gave him a menacing, but compelling appearance, and his sharp blade of a nose rested over a pair of full, wide lips. Separately, his features were forceful, but together they made a devastating combination.

His body was lean, with the look of time well spent in a gym. And his air of cocky self-assurance was somehow appealing, and likely garnered more than one glance from the opposite sex wherever he went. All in all, Tag Webster was the kind of man who could walk into the room and command all eyes on him without saying a word.

That first meeting had impressed Alex a lot. That a reputable plastic surgeon with a successful practice would do charity work for underprivileged patients spoke of his great character. And she'd really liked the way he had handled Tiffany. It seemed that he had quite a winning way with children.

At the time, she could tell by the way he'd looked at her that he wanted her, too, but Alex instinctively knew she'd have to be one to make the first move. She'd taken his business card and called him the very next day. They'd had an instant rapport and had started initially with talking nightly on the phone. Then the calls had turned into lunches, which had transformed into real dates. Pretty soon, their relationship had progressed to sex, which hadn't been what she'd expected at all.

It had been even better.

No one else made her body sing, stroked her to a frenzy, or made her pussy so damn wet she soaked the sheets. After four months of dating him, Alex knew for certain that her feelings were based on more than the physical and was sure that Tag's were as well. When he'd asked her to move in with him, she'd jumped at the chance, giving up her cozy apartment over the beauty salon where she worked as a hair dresser.

She'd thought, of course, that by moving in with him he'd really wanted marriage, but a year later, she was nothing more than a glorified mistress and housekeeper. It galled her to think of all that she did for him while still holding down her job at the shop. Though Tag had told her that she didn't have to work if she didn't want to, quitting her job would really have made her feel like a kept woman.

It was humiliating to go to family functions and be asked when they were going to tie the knot. It had been even worse when Tag had responded by stating in no uncertain terms in front of her entire family that he wasn't interested in the institution of matrimony.

Maybe if she'd known before moving in how he felt about getting married she wouldn't have done so, but now Alex was in too deep. She loved Tag so much it hurt. Other than their difference of opinion on wedlock, he was a wonderful man, a considerate lover, a great listener, and the bestcuddler ever. He always had a way of making her feel like she was the most beautiful woman in the world. In his field, he saw gorgeous women who were obsessed with their looks on a daily basis, but he always came home to her.

Really, he was perfect in almost every way. It was his outlook on marriage that soured everything. Something else that bothered her a lot was that she'd never met his family. Was he ashamed of her? Every time Alex brought up the topic of meeting his relatives, he'd blown her off.

She sighed as she listened to him move around before he came to their room. The pretense of happiness was getting harder to maintain.

The minute he slid into bed, she knew he wanted to make love. He always did, but if he thought he was getting some black tail tonight, he had another think coming, especially after he'd told her earlier today to get off his back and stop nagging him about forming a permanent union.

Tag moved closer to her, a hand landing on her shoulder.

Alex forced herself not to respond. She wouldn't let him do this to her. He'd have to learn that he couldn't always have his way.

"Alex, I know you're awake, so stop pretending you're asleep. You're not even breathing like someone sleeping," he whispered, brushing his lips against her ear. She held herself tightly to keep from shivering.

"I'm not in the mood, Tag," Alex hissed through clenched teeth. She knew without looking that he was already naked. He never wore anything to bed.

"Oh, I can change that." She heard the amusement in his voice and wanted to punch him. He captured her earlobe between strong teeth, the slight sting of his bite making her gasp in surprise and pleasure. Damn him. Tag knew how nibbling on her ear drove her wild with desire.

"Tag. Please don't. I told you I'm not in the mood." She groaned, and her pussy starting to tingle. He continued to nip at her sensitive flesh like he hadn't heard her. "Tag," she moaned, knowing that she was on the verge of giving in.

"Yeah, babe?" He turned Alex onto her back. She looked up into his twinkling black eyes.

"Why do you always do this to me?"

"Because you like it. What's up with the nightgown?"

“I told you --”

“And I told you that if you ever wore a nightgown to bed, I’d rip it off.” The feral gleam in his eyes told her that he wasn’t kidding. Before she could protest, Tag ripped the covers away, gripped the front of her nightgown in his hands, and tore it down the front.

“Tag, stop it!”

“Never. You knew the consequences. I bet you even wanted me to do this -- you knew it would be like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Well, you’ve messed with the bull and it’s time for the horns.” When Tag went into Alpha-mode, Alex knew there wasn’t a damn thing she could do to change his mind. Besides, he was right. Hadn’t she secretly wanted to him to do this?

He continued his task of stripping her with urgent movements before sliding on top of her and burying his face against her neck. He pressed hot kisses into her heated skin, such that there was only one thing she could do.

Surrender.

Her fingers dug into his thick, black hair, holding his head against her. The warmth of his breath sent pulses of ecstasy down her spine. Tag’s kisses were making it hard for her to think, but at this point, Alex didn’t care. The angry words of this morning’s argument no longer mattered. The only thing worth thinking about at this moment was the pure, unadulterated lust coursing from her head to her toes.

“Oh, Tag.” His tongue grazed the hollow of her throat.

“That’s more like it,” he growled.

Tag nudged her thighs apart with his knee, rubbing the length of his cock against her moist slit. The rock-hard shaft pulsed and rubbed, teasing her. She wished he’d hurry up and move it into her, but she knew he’d only give in when she could no longer articulate her desires. That was one thing that made him an excellent lover. He always took her body to the heights of passion, making her so hot she could barely breathe before he screwed her senseless.

He shifted to the side of her and trailed a finger down the center of her body.

“Tag,” she moaned helplessly, the way she did every time he touched her. His finger didn’t stop until they reached her throbbing cunt. “Touch me, please,” she begged, arching her hot sex against his palm.

“You want it bad, don’t you?” A knowing grin lit his face.

“You know I do, dammit. Don’t tease me!” Alex grabbed the hand cupping her and mashed it against her pussy. She felt certain she’d die if release didn’t come soon.

“Eager, aren’t you, babe?” he taunted, and if she weren’t so damn horny, she’d knee him in the nuts for torturing her like this. “I thought you weren’t in the mood.”

“Shut up, and fuck me!”

“No dice, babe. I want to play with you a little first.” His middle finger slid between her folds, grazing the

sensitive button nestled at the top.

She gasped from the delicious delight of his touch. "Oh, God, Tag."

"That's it, baby. Moan for me." His lips brushed against her cheek. Her body was hot, scorched by the heat generated from Tag's flesh rubbing against hers. Only he could push her to this burning need for fulfillment. Another finger joined the first and Tag squeezed her clit, eliciting a soft moan from her throat. Her hips ground against his hand. Highly aroused and wanting more, she said, "Tag, you're a bastard. Do you know that?"

He chuckled, seemingly unconcerned with that statement. "Maybe so, sweetheart, but you want this bastard, don't you?"

She didn't want to say the words, but knew Tag wouldn't let up until he had his way. "I do, dammit."

"Not good enough." His fingers clamped down tighter on her sensitive bud, sending shockwaves of pleasure soaring through her body. A thin line of sweat ran down the side of her face. Lord, she was burning up.

"I want it bad, Tag. Really, really bad."

White teeth appeared. "Very good," he said before lowering his head to take one taut nipple between his lips. His mouth was hungry, hot, and savage like a wild man as he suckled and nibbled.

"Ouch!" Alex yelped when his teeth clamped on the tight bud. She'd cried out more from surprise than anything else because the pleasure far outweighed the pain. She loved it when he got a little rough with her. Nice, sweet lovemaking was great, but sometimes a little bit of low-down, dirty fucking was the only thing that would do. Alex didn't want to be made love to right now. She wanted to fuck.

"Give it to me, Tag! I need it!"

"You don't get it until I say you do. This is your punishment for trying to deny me and yourself when we both know you want this." He transferred his attention to her other rigid nipple, then released her clit. Fingers plunged into her slick channel, probing, digging, seeking.

Her nails dug into his shoulders, breaking skin.

He lifted his head, black eyes locking with hers. "You little wildcat," he groaned passionately. His lips returned to her breast in a warm caress. She shivered. Desire pulsed within her body, matching the rhythm of her heart. She wanted to grab him by the cock and demand that he fuck her, but Tag had an almost superhuman amount of restraint.

He was the master of her body and secret desires, firing up her blood more than any man she'd ever been with. She was his slave, helpless against the passion he unleashed inside her.

Alex arched her back against his touch as Tag finger-fucked her with quick, steady thrusts. Moisture dripped down the inside of her thighs.

Lifting his head to look at her, he appeared slightly dangerous. "Moan for me again, Alex. You know how I love to hear you."

“Tag!”

“Who do you belong to?”

“You. Only you.”

His hot tongue stroked the valley of her breasts. “Whose body is this?”

She trembled. “Yours!”

“And don’t you forget it!”

How could she, when he handled her body so deliciously?

“You’re so beautiful.” He groaned again, covering her mouth in a fervent kiss. Her mouth opened eagerly under the savage assault of his. Tongues pushed forward, tasting and exploring the recesses of each other’s mouths.

He sucked her tongue, dominating the kiss. When Tag finally lifted his head, they both panted for breath, although the intensity of his stare threatened to steal hers away. He straddled her once again, his arms holding him braced above her. She lifted her hips to meet his cock, but he shook his head.

“Uhuh , babe. I want you on all fours. I love fucking you from behind. That big beautiful ass of yours is just waiting to be spanked. You want that, too, don’t you?” A cocksure grin lit up his face.

She did. She wanted it more than anything. Alex answered without hesitation. “Oh, God, yes.” Before she could utter another word, Tag scrambled to his knees and flipped her over. She positioned herself on hands and knees, shaking with anticipation, and her pussy was so wet that she dripped.

Thankfully, Tag didn’t torture her further. She sighed with relief when the tip of his cock slid between her folds. Alex pushed her hips back as he moved forward, savoring the delicious length of him. He was so deep within her. They were one and she loved it.

Tag wasn’t the largest lover she’d ever been with, but his seven and a half inches, combined with an impressive girth, was enough to make her cream with each powerful thrust. He gripped her hips, digging his fingers into her skin. She wiggled impatiently when he paused.

“Hurry, Tag!”

“You took your pill this morning, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did. Why --”

His cock slammed into her before she could finish. What the fuck?! This was the third time he’d asked that question during sex, and now it finally dawned on her why. How dare he?! About to voice her displeasure with his words, Alex decided to forget everything just as his cock hit the right spot. Forget temporarily. She’d confront him over his words later.

His thrusts were hard and deep. She tilted her head back, fully expecting him to grasp a handful of her hair. She knew he loved to tug and play with its length. Alex had been thinking of cutting it for a while, but had kept it long for him. Besides, she kind of liked him yanking her hair during all the action.

She wasn't disappointed; he grabbed a hold of her ponytail, pulling it roughly. She didn't mind one single bit. That, combined with his pounding cock, drove her insane with lust.

"That's it, Tag!" she cried. "Fuck me hard!"

Smack.

His hand cracked down on her ass. "God damn, you're tight, baby. You have the tightest pussy I've ever fucked, and it's mine. All mine. I'm not going to let anyone else fuck this pussy."

Smack.

His hand came down on her tender rump again, this time on the other cheek. The pain was minimal, but the pleasure was immense.

"Yes! This pussy is yours and only yours. Harder! Faster!" she screamed, wanting it dirtier and rougher.

Tag surged forward, increasing the pace of their motions, his cock slamming into her sopping cunt. Alex knew she'd be a little sore in the morning, but this was well worth it. Only Tag could make her want it like this. She felt like a wanton, always craving more of his cock. She could sense a build-up in her body that slowly spread from the tips of her toes up her legs, then traveled along her spine. When the sensation reached her head, Alex thought she'd lose consciousness.

He carried her to an intense, frenzied peak. She yelled when she achieved her mind-shattering release. "Tag! I love you!"

His grip tightened on her hips for several more strokes until he came. "Oh, fuck, yeah!" He continued to grind into her, his balls emptying into her thirsty pussy.

When her arms would no longer hold her steady, Alex collapsed, with Tag following. He rolled onto his back and gathered her in his arms. She turned around until she faced him, resting her head against his broad chest.

They remained silent for several minutes. Alex wondered what was going on in his mind. As usual, he hadn't said he loved her. Was this what their relationship was destined to be? Would he never utter the words she wanted to hear? Alex realized she should leave him, but the prospect of never seeing him again scared her.

Chapter Two

The smell of turkey bacon filled the air and his stomach responded with a low growl. Still, Tag knew something was wrong the moment he entered the kitchen. Alex was already up, cooking breakfast like she usually did, but her back was stiff, and without seeing her face, he knew she was upset. Great. The last thing he needed was another argument this early in the damn morning.

He had a day full of consultations and a breast augmentation surgery later. Going into the office with

angry words on his mind wasn't how Tag had planned to begin his day. He decided to play things cool.

"Morning, babe." He walked over to her and planted a chaste kiss on her warm, brown cheek.

"Hmm," was all he got for his effort. No "good morning," and Alex was already dressed, which was odd, because she usually didn't go to her shop until ten. Tag decided to follow the example of the military by not asking. He didn't want whatever was on her mind to turn into another argument.

He put on a fresh pot of coffee and poured her a cup before sitting down at the table. His newspaper rested on his place mat as usual, but a niggling feeling told him not to pick it up as he usually did. Tag just couldn't shake the feeling that something was up and, as much as he wanted to ignore it, doing so was tough.

He knew he'd regret it, but found himself asking anyway. "Alex, is anything the matter?"

She slowly turned around and gave him a tight smile. "Why do you ask, Tag? Everything is just peachy. What could possibly be wrong?"

He knew that tone well. She was spoiling for a fight. Well, if Alex was going to play games and not tell him what was on her mind, then he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of probing.

"Okay, in that case ..." He shrugged and raised the paper. Without looking up he could tell she was glaring. He could feel her stare burning him like he was an ant under a magnifying glass on a sunny day.

When he didn't face her, she finally turned away from him, banging pots and pans noisily around the oven range. What the hell? Tag tried very hard to attempt an air of nonchalance while he flipped through the pages of news. However, once Alex practically threw the food onto his plate, Tag realized she wouldn't let him have any peace until he found out what the issue was.

"What?" he asked in defeat, tossing the paper aside.

"For a man with a medical degree, you aren't very bright, are you?"

His hackles were instantly raised. Though Alex couldn't possibly know this because he never spoke of his childhood, nothing angered him more than when someone questioned his intelligence. Having been raised in a home where he was constantly called stupid meant he had a very low threshold on the topic.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Last night, you asked me if I'm on the pill."

Was that what the fuss was all about? "Huh?"

"Huh, nothing. It wasn't the first time you've asked it, either, and I won't let you disrespect me like that again. How dare you ask me that? How ... dare ... you!" By the time she finished, she was practically screaming.

"How dare I? What are you getting so upset about? It's a simple question. We agreed you'd take the pill at the beginning of this relationship."

"Exactly, because you don't want children."

“So what? I’ve made it no secret. What are you getting so mad about?”

Arms crossed over her chest, her nostrils flaring, she glared at him. “Do you think I want children out of wedlock? I wasn’t raised like that, but the fact that you’d ask me that, and during sex of all times, was hurtful.” Her light brown eyes flashed with righteous indignation. With arms unfolding and hands flying to her hips, Alex looked pissed.

Tag stood up, his appetite lost. “What the hell’s the big deal? So I asked you if you’re on the pill. It wasn’t the fucking Spanish Inquisition.” He didn’t mean to curse at her, but his temper had reared its ugly head.

“You may not think it was a big thing, but it was to me. It wasn’t even the question itself, but the reason you asked me last night and the same reason you asked me before. But I know why you did it.”

“Oh, do you, Miss Know-It-All? Why, then?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Tag. You asked because you wanted to make sure I wasn’t trying to trap you. You think if I got pregnant, you’d have to marry me, and that’s the last thing you want, right?”

He couldn’t deny it. Children and marriage had never entered into the equation for him. He liked kids a lot but didn’t want any of his own because he believed they should be born within the union of marriage, and as he had no intention of ever getting hitched, there was no point in having them.

He’d grown up dirt poor and living off the state’s system with four brothers and two sisters, all of them by a different father, and an abusive mother who was also a functioning alcoholic. It had been a nightmare. His mother had been married three times before she took off with another woman’s husband, leaving Tag and his siblings to their own devices. He’d been only fourteen.

After spending a year and a half in the foster care system, his mother had returned. The state of Virginia, in their infinite wisdom -- not -- had returned him and his siblings to her care, this time with husband number four in tow, a low-life biker named Scott. When Scott wasn’t beating the hell out of his mother and the kids, he was spending their welfare checks on booze and drugs.

One day, Tag had snapped. He and Scott had gotten into it, and he’d ended up breaking his stepfather’s jaw. The man had taken off the next day, but was his mother grateful to be free of the tyranny? Hell, no. Melissa Webster had taken to the bottle even harder and became more verbally abusive than ever.

Unable to handle it anymore, Tag had left home shortly before his seventeenth birthday. He’d gotten his GED and, with the equivalent of a high school diploma in hand, he had begun taking classes at the local community college. He’d then applied to, and, being white, had received a minority scholarship for Howard University. Not only had he discovered his love for medicine there, but he’d also realized his love for black women. Tag enjoyed women of all races, but he had a soft spot for black women. Their skin coloring spanned different shades, and they had shapely asses and an air of confidence they always carried with them.

After graduating summa cum laude from Howard, he’d won a partial grant to medical school at Georgetown University. Those years were difficult. He worked hard, struggled, and made many sacrifices, but he’d never forgotten his family. He had tried to help them as best as he could, but you couldn’t help people who wouldn’t help themselves.

Two of his brothers were in jail, and one was in a mental institution from years of abuse. His two sisters had followed the example of their mother and became teenage mothers. One was married and already divorced; the other was on her second baby with a different man. His youngest brother, who'd Tag had always thought had the greatest chance of success, had married young and was miserable, working a crummy nine-to-five job and supporting a woman who refused to work and help out with bills.

The life he'd led, coupled with his family's dysfunctional outcomes, had proven to Tag beyond a shadow of doubt that marriage and children were not a direction he wanted to ever go. He adored Alex, but he'd been honest from the beginning, had told her up front that he had no desire to marry. He wouldn't apologize for his feelings now.

"Yes, that's exactly why I asked. I wanted to make sure we were still on the same page."

The next thing he knew, an open palm flew toward his face. Thankfully his years of Tae Kwan Do training had taught him to react quickly.

"Don't you ever raise your hand to me again, Alex! I would never ever lay hands on you, so don't even think of doing it to me."

Her nostrils flared. She looked unrepentant. "Why? You deserve it. How could you think I would try to trap you? Hasn't this past year meant anything to you? Do you really think so little of me that you think I'd pull a stunt like that?"

"You're the one who keeps bringing up marriage after, I might add, I've repeatedly said I'm not interested."

"You didn't answer my question. Do you think me capable of trying to trap you?" The sheen in her light brown eyes looked suspiciously like tears.

He sighed. Tag hadn't meant to question her integrity, but this was an issue he wouldn't budge on. "Alex, you're young. You'll soon learn that marriage isn't the be all and end all of everything." He patted her on the shoulder, which only seemed to enrage her.

"Don't you dare patronize me, Taggart Webster."

She never used his full name unless she was really angry. He'd have to tread lightly. "I'm not trying to patronize you. I'm just trying to say that marriage isn't for me -- something you've always known."

"Why?"

"The way I see it, marriage is just a lousy piece of paper that represents nothing but lies and broken promises."

"How can you say that? My parents have been married for over thirty years, and happily, I'll have you know."

He lifted a brow. "Are they?"

"Yes! And you have a lot of nerve to imply otherwise."

"What about your sister? Her marriage didn't end so happily ever after."

“So she married a jerk. That doesn’t mean all marriages don’t work.”

“Fifty percent of marriages in this country end in divorce, and the other half may not be living as happily as they appear to be.”

Her eyelids fell and the fight suddenly seemed to leave her. “Is that what you really believe, Tag?”

“You’ve always known how I felt. I’ve said it on numerous occasions.”

“Yes, I know, but I thought ...”

“Thought you could change my mind? Sorry, my dear, but that’s not going to happen. Look, we have a good thing going here. Why rock the boat?”

“Although we basically live as husband and wife already, I don’t get the benefits of a legalized union. What if you were seriously injured? I wouldn’t have the right to decide what to do with you as your next of kin, and vice versa. You’d have no recourse if something were to happen to me.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous. You’re thinking about things that may or may not happen. There are people who are paid to do that -- they’re called insurance agents. Look, you knew the deal. Let’s just sit down and have breakfast. In fact, tell you what, why don’t you cancel all your appointments at the salon and have a day at the spa. My treat. You can use the Titanium Visa.”

“Is that your solution to everything? Give me your credit card so I’ll shut up? That’s not going to work this time, Tag.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “What do you want, then?”

Alex shrugged. “Besides marriage? Your love and respect would be nice.”

“I do respect you, Alex. As far as love is concerned, I don’t believe it really exists.”

“How can you say that? I love you, Tag.”

“You don’t really love me. I know you don’t, and one day you’ll realize that, too.”

“Then what do we have?”

“Mutual respect, understanding, companionship, and mind-blowing sex. Now, come on, Alex, let’s have breakfast and, tonight, I’ll take you out. We can go down to the Wharf and go to the new seafood restaurant you wanted to try.” He hoped his offer would mollify her.

She shook her head, a desperate look in her eyes. “Maybe I won’t be here when you get back.”

His eyes narrowed. She’d threatened to leave him on several occasions these past couple of months, but she never had. He was getting damn tired of her threats.

“Oh, you’ll be here all right, dammit, and this is why!” He grabbed her, his arms wrapping around her body. The minute his mouth clamped on to Alex’s, the same turbulent feelings rushed through his body the way they always did. She always had this effect on him. He couldn’t get enough of her taste, scent,

and the way she felt in his arms. His cock became rigid, and his tongue pried her lips apart, demanding entrance. Alex struggled against his hold, but Tag wouldn't release her until he'd gotten what he wanted.

God, she was sweet; the petal-soft lips beneath his were nearly more than he could take. Every time he kissed her was like the first time, each touch making him feel like his body would burst into flames from the heat they ignited together.

He ground his pelvis against her crotch. Only when she relaxed and returned his hungry kiss did he loosen his grip. Tag lifted his hands to cup the sides of her face, probing deeper into her mouth. He wanted to taste all of her. The soft moans she released filled him with masculine pride. It was he who had brought her to this state of arousal.

If he didn't have to be at his office in an hour, he'd take her to their bedroom and make love to her until the thought of leaving never crossed her mind again. Tag lifted his head, looking down into her slightly dazed eyes.

"Let's not argue about this again, okay?" he coaxed.

Alex gasped, pulling away from him. "You've got a lot of damn nerve! Did you think a mere kiss would get me off the topic? I'm very serious, Tag."

That was it. He refused to continue this conversation. "Grow up, Alex. I wish you'd leave me alone and forget about this marriage crap. If you absolutely have to have marriage, then you can forget about me, too!" He knew he was laying it on a bit thick, but he wasn't about to give into emotional blackmail.

Just then the house shook and the lights began to flicker on and off. What the hell? "Are you okay, Alex?"

Shenodded, a strange look in her eyes. She was probably shocked.

"Who would have thought an earthquake would occur in Maryland? Maybe we'll hear something about it on the news later," he said lightly.

Again, she only nodded. Tag sighed, not wanting to leave for work with the way things were. "Alex, say something."

She looked at him, but didn't speak. It was almost like she was looking past him. His lips tightened. If this was another one of her games, he wasn't playing. "I'll grab breakfast on the way to the office and see you when I get home."

She stood still. Tag turned away in frustration and gathered his car keys. She'd get out her funk soon enough. Alex would just have to learn that sometimes you couldn't always get what you wanted.

* * * * *

"Psyche!" A screech rang through Eros's Temple of Love.

"Oh, boy," Psyche muttered. Aphrodite was in a rage again and, as usual, the anger was directed toward her. One would think that the woman would have mellowed out after a couple of millennia. At least she learned not to take the goddess's outbursts personally. Aphrodite would have hated anyone who married her precious son, Eros. Besides, with the God of Love as your husband, an evil

mother-in-law was a small price to pay.

She turned around to face the blonde goddess. Aphrodite was so beautiful at times it was difficult for mere mortals to look directly at her. What a shame it was that her main flaw was being a jealous shrew.

Psyche pasted a smile on her face. "Yes, Mother, dear?"

Aphrodite's eyes narrowed. "How many times have I told you not to call me that? I'm not your mother, nor will I ever be."

Ignoring the goddess's rant, Psyche's smile remained. "What can I do for you today?"

"You know damn well what I'm here for. I've told you many times not to get mixed up with humans. You may be the wife of a god, but that doesn't give you the right to interfere with our jobs."

Blinking innocently in the face of her enraged mother-in-law, she asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Don't be an even bigger idiot than you already are. I'm talking about Taggart Webster. I have personally taken an interest in his case."

Psyche gulped. Had she screwed with something she shouldn't have? It wouldn't be the first time, but usually her husband smoothed things over. As it was getting closer to Valentine's Day, Eros was on his yearly sojourn, shooting arrows at unsuspecting lovers, and wouldn't be back until the holiday ended.

When she'd visited Earth, Psyche sometimes granted wishes to humans, but knew to be careful not to bother any humans who were under the gods' or goddess' protection. "But ... he, uh, he said ... Well, why would you be interested in someone who doesn't believe in love?"

"That's exactly why I'm interested in him, you dumb, dumb ..." Her mother-in-law sputtered, apparently unable to find a suitable insult, and poked her finger into Psyche's chest with every word. "He's a challenge. You had better fix this or else!"

She was in big trouble. "Oh, dear."

"Oh, dear,' is right! You're going to be kicked out of Olympus for this."

"But how can I fix it when he's been granted a love wish, blessed by this temple? They're hard to reverse."

"Humph. Maybe you should have thought about that before you did this idiotic thing!" Aphrodite was screeching, not looking very beautiful at that moment.

Psyche's patience was wearing thin. "Instead of hurling insults at me, tell me what I can do to make things right."

Her mother-in-law tossed a golden lock over her shoulder. "I don't know what my son sees in you."

"Would you get over yourself for once? This wicked witch act is getting really old. You could never stand the fact that you're no longer the most important woman in Eros's life and, besides, you've always been jealous of me."

Ice-blue eyes glared at her. "One day, my son will come to his senses and when he does, I'll be dancing for joy."

"If it hasn't happened yet, it ain't gonna. Are you going to help me or are you going to stand there bitching?"

The goddess shook her golden head. "You'd better watch carefully what you say to me. Of course, you know I will have to go to Zeus about this, and you do know what will happen, don't you?"

Psyche smiled, knowing she had one last card to play. "Oh, I don't think so, and this is why ..."

Chapter Three

Gone. Son of a bitch, she was really gone. Tag lit his third cigarette in ten minutes. If Alex had been here, she'd have had a fit seeing him smoking in the house. But she wasn't here and hadn't been for nearly a month.

How could she have walked out on him without so much as a goodbye? The morning after their big argument, as ticked as he'd been, he'd never really expected her to leave him as she'd threatened to do so many times before. When he'd come home that night, however, flowers and candy in hand, she had been nowhere in sight. Not only that, but all traces of her had disappeared, too, as if she'd never lived there at all.

His house had looked the same as it did before she'd moved in with him. The pictures she'd hung, her knick-knacks, even the hole in the wall she'd created when trying to hammer in a nail was gone. The fresh scent of a clean house was absent, the hint of her sweet perfume no longer lingered in the air, and her clothes were missing.

How could she have removed all traces of herself in so short a time period? With her disappearance from his home, other things flew out the window, too. Almost immediately, he'd taken up smoking as much as he had before she'd met him. His nurse at the office never asked about Alex as she usually did, and everything that had been remotely connected to her was gone. It was incredibly stressful, not to mention eerie.

In the beginning, Tag thought Alex was trying to force his hand, but as time passed without contact from her, he'd come to the realization that she might be serious, after all. He'd tried to brush it off, told himself he didn't need her. He wasn't the marrying kind and she knew it. Fine. There were plenty more women out there who'd kill to be in the position she'd been in.

When a week went by, then turned into another and yet another, he'd begun to miss her like hell. He knew then that he'd made a huge mistake. It wasn't just the things she'd done for him around the house that he missed, but it was her smile, intelligent conversations, and the way her eyes would light up when he'd walk into a room. And Tag hadn't known how hard it would be to live without her. His cock stayed

in a constant state of arousal at the mere thought of her. Masturbation was no longer enough, and waking up in the middle of the night without her warmth or soft body curled next to his was torture. It made it difficult for him to fall back asleep.

He missed her. All of her.

Dammit! Why did it take her leaving for him to finally realize that love truly did exist?

He loved her. And if this wasn't love, what could it be? Why else would he think of nothing but her morning, noon, and night? Why else was he now up to two packs of cigarettes a day and unable to rest at night? Hell, earlier today, he'd almost left a tube inside a patient during surgery because he was thinking of her! For one of the most sought-after plastic surgeons in the D.C. area to nearly make a critical error like that during a simple liposuction procedure not only could have resulted in a nasty malpractice suit but also possibly damaged his reputation and practice. Alex's departure had him more twisted than he ever thought it possibly could, all right.

He stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette. He'd call her. Yes. That's what he'd do. Feeling better than he had in the last few weeks, he grabbed the cordless phone beside the couch. It was not quite five o'clock so the beauty shop she worked at should still be open, as Tuesdays were their late nights.

Tag punched the number impatiently into his phone, then waited for someone to pick up.

"Blessings Beauty Salon," a gum-snapping receptionist answered.

"May I please speak to Alex?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line followed by the sound of muffled conversation before the receptionist came back on the line. "Alex is with a client right now, may I take a message? Or if you want to make an appointment with her, I could do that for you." Her gum popped with every word, smacking loudly in his ear.

"Could you tell her it's Tag?" She'd always told him that she'd drop whatever she was doing if he phoned her at work. He'd only done it a couple times in the course of their relationship but, true to her word, she'd always answered.

Again, muffled conversation. "Can I get a number for her to get back to you?"

"No. I actually need to speak with her."

"And I said she was with a client. If this is a solicitation, we don't want it." The receptionist sounded slightly belligerent. Was Alex screening her calls?

"I'm not soliciting anything. This is personal business."

"I told her your name, but she's busy."

"But I'm her boyfriend. I know she may not want to speak to me because we argued, but it's important that I talk to her."

"You don't say? Funny, Alex never mentioned she has a boyfriend. Hold on a second." The phone clacked loudly on the other end, practically blasting his ear. He waited for what seemed like forever

before someone came on the line.

“Who the hell is this?” It was Alex.

“Didn’t the receptionist tell you?” He knew he’d have to humble himself, so getting annoyed wasn’t an option.

“Yes, Trish said some guy was on the line saying that he’s my boyfriend. I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Alex, please. I know I was wrong, but if we could just talk about it, maybe you’ll see your way to forgiving me.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Alex? Say something. Please.”

“Why are you calling me? I don’t know you, and I’d appreciate it if you don’t call here again. There are laws against prank calls and stalkers.”

About to respond, Tag was cut off by a loud click. He knew she had every right to be upset with him, but to pretend that she didn’t know him was somewhat extreme. He immediately stabbed at the redial key.

“Blessings Beauty Salon.” This time, Trish’s high pitched voice was thankfully without the accompanying snapping of gum.

“Could you please put Alex back on the line?”

“Is this the weirdo that just called? Don’t call here again, you creep!”

Click.

This was not going to fly. If this was what Alex wanted, then he’d have to play it, on her terms. He’d crawl on his hands and knees if that was what was required.

He just had to get her back.

* * * * *

Alex swept the hair from her station into the dust pan. It had been a long, agonizing day, and her head felt like it would split wide open.

She glanced at her watch. Nearly closing time. Her sister, Olivia, was supposed to come by to borrow a couple DVDs in a few minutes. It was nice that Alex didn’t have a long way to travel to get home so time wasn’t an issue for her. Living over the shop was a convenient arrangement. The rent was cheap, and since there was no need for transportation to and from work, there were no commuting expenses to worry about. She was able to save a fair amount of money ... money that would help her realize the dream of opening a shop of her own.

Today had been especially tough because her first client had been a crying child; then there was the woman who had insisted on a style that was too young for her. That wouldn’t have been so bad if the

client with extremely damaged hair -- split ends nearly to the roots -- threatened to beat her up when she felt Alex had cut off too much of it.

Ha. Alex had only cut two inches when she actually should have shaved the woman bald in order to get a healthy head of hair. At the client's insistence, however, she'd refrained from cutting a lot. In the end, she let the woman go without paying. It wasn't worth the fight especially when there were other people waiting to get their hair done.

To top things off, some nut had called claiming to be her boyfriend. He had sounded sexy on the phone, with a deep voice that had momentarily made her forget he was a lunatic, but a lunatic he was, nonetheless. Why else would he call her shop making such an outrageous claim?

She'd wondered how he had gotten her name and work number, but then realized he had probably found one of her business cards somewhere. She'd handed out quite a few out to potential clients.

Why the nut claimed to be her man, she wasn't sure. It would have been nice to have a boyfriend, but she thought it was more important to find the right guy. She wouldn't settle for just anyone. Her parents were a shining example of what marriage should be. After nearly thirty-five years of wedlock, they still carried on like a couple of teenagers.

They had taught her that happily-ever-after did indeed exist. On the flipside, however, her sister, who'd ended up marrying the man who'd taken her virginity, had taught Alex not that she'd rather be alone than be unhappy, but that sometimes finding Mr. Right requires some patience. None of the family had ever really warmed to Bill, a superficial, jealous man, but Olivia had stuck by him through the carousing, the drinking, and even the verbal abuse.

It was only when he'd raised a hand against their daughter that Olivia had gained the strength to leave that jerk. It was so unfair that her gorgeous, sweet sister had ended up with someone so unworthy of her.

The jingling of bells signaled that someone had entered the shop. She looked up to see Olivia, followed by Tiffany, who came running through the shop, pigtails flying behind her.

The child screeched, hurtling into her with a big hug. "Auntie Alex!"

"Hey, Babycakes. How's my favorite niece?"

Tiffany giggled. "I'm your only niece."

Alex smiled at the child's wit. "But you're still my favorite."

The six-year-old smiled slyly. "My birthday is coming up."

Alex laughed, glad she only had one niece; otherwise, she'd be broke. As much as she spent on this child, it was almost like Tiffany was her daughter. Not that she minded. Tiffany was a sweet little girl who'd suffered so much. It tore at Alex's heart to look at her niece's face and see the extensive damage from that dog savaging her.

Fortunately, the rottweiler that had attacked her hadn't bitten hard enough to cause any nerve injury, but it had been enough to leave extensive damage on the side of the child's face. The doctors had done the best they could for her, but there were still noticeable scars. It had broken Alex's heart when Olivia had told her that the kids at school called her a monster and wouldn't play with Tiffany. And it angered her

that her ex-brother-in-law, Bill, refused to lift a finger to help. A good plastic surgeon could have fixed the worst of the scars, but without the funds, there weren't many options for the child.

Still, Tiffany had managed to stay positive and upbeat. How this child persisted in waking up every morning and keeping a smile on her face amazed Alex. Though her niece was just a little girl, she was Alex's hero.

"So what do you want for your birthday?"

"I want the Amazing Amanda doll, but the brown one, not the white one."

"Well, I'll definitely see what I can do about it."

Tiffany clapped her hands together and jumped up and down, excitement blazing in her dark eyes. "Oh, goodie!"

"I have some cookies in the back room. Why don't you go get a couple?"

"What kind of cookies?"

"What's my name, little lady?"

"Auntie Alex!"

"Dartootin', and what's Auntie's favorite cookie?"

"Chocolate chip!" Tiffany shouted with a fist raised in the air.

"That's right, you little monkey. Now, why don't you go get some so I can talk to your mom?"

"Okay." The little girl turned to her mother. "Will you be okay without me for a few minutes, Mommy?" As a result of her parents' breakup, Tiffany had become very protective of her mother.

Olivia smiled. "Of course I will, baby. Go ahead."

Apparently satisfied, Tiffany raced to the backroom without a backward glance. Olivia stepped forward, her smile falling. She sighed.

"I don't know where she gets that energy from."

"She's six. Remember when you were six?" Alex grinned.

"That was twenty-two years ago, although I feel like I'm forty-eight right now." Olivia brushed the bangs from her forehead.

"Is everything okay? Any more drama with Bill?"

"The same as usual, of course. His support check bounced this month so now my account's overdrawn because I had checks written against it."

"Did you call him?"

“Of course, I did. And as usual, he gave me some lame-ass excuse. This time he said there must be some kind of mistake. That sorry bastard. I get paid tomorrow at work, but the overdraft fees are going to eat a big chunk of what’s deposited.”

“I can give you the money to cover those. How much do you need?”

“No. I absolutely will not let you dip into your savings again to solve my problems. You’ve helped me out too many times. At this rate, you’ll never get a shop of your own opened. I’m your big sister. I should be the one coming to your rescue, not the other way around.” Olivia looked on the verge of tears, and it served to infuriate Alex even further because it made her want to thrash her good-for-nothing ex-brother-in-law.

As a kid, Alex had always looked up to her sweet, older sister, the beauty in the family. Although they were both roughly around the same height at five feet six, and had the same curvy build, Olivia was stunning with smooth, dark-brown skin, large, dark, slightly up-tilted eyes, a straight, proud nose resting over lush lips, and a head full of naturally curly hair. Men often followed her around like puppy dogs, but the amazing thing was that it never went to her head. The downside of being such an attractive woman was that Olivia sometimes drew the type of men who were solely interested in her looks rather than her as a person. Bill was a prime case in point.

“O, that’s what family is for. If you can’t come to us when there’s a problem, who can you turn to?”

“I’m tired of turning to Mom, Dad, and you when I have a problem. You all warned me not to marry Bill, but I thought he loved me and that I loved him. For him, I threw away the opportunity to finish college and I can’t afford to go back to school. I refuse to ask Mom and Dad for the money because I’m no longer their responsibility.” A tear ran down Olivia’s cheek. She quickly wiped it away. “Now I don’t know what I’m going to do with myself. I don’t have any major talents and I’m in two dead-end jobs going nowhere fast. Look at you -- you do hair like a dream. That’s a gift. To top everything off, I’m a lousy mother.”

Alex’s hands flew to her hips. “Don’t you ever say that again. You’re an excellent mother. Anyone who sees you with Tiffany can tell how much you guys love each other.”

She couldn’t believe her sister was getting down on herself again. Not only was she drop-dead gorgeous, Olivia was loyal, dependable, compassionate, and loving. Not a lot of people possessed so many fine qualities. And, sometimes, she had such a serene quality about her that she was almost angelic, practically too good to be true. Still, every now and then Olivia would start feeling sorry for herself and Alex would indulge her woe-is-me party. But only for a few minutes before the tough love kicked in.

“Of course I’m a bad mother. Just look at Tiffany’s face. That’s my fault. I’m the one who left her with our neighbor so I could go out with friends. I knew the woman had dog, but I didn’t think twice about placing Tiffany in her hands. Because of my negligence, my baby will probably look like that for the rest of her life!” She burst into noisy tears.

Alex pulled her sister into a tight embrace. “Shh. It’s okay. These things happen for a reason.”

“What possible reason could there be for what happened to my baby?”

“I don’t know. Only God knows for sure. Look, I’m going to lock up, we’ll go upstairs and I’ll fix you some tea. I’ll write you a check for those overdraft fees and if you argue with me, I’m going to slap the

silly out of you.” Alex pulled away from a now-contrite Olivia.

The older woman gave her a weak smile, dark eyes shiny with tears. “You’re too good to me.”

“You’re my sister, girl. I know if I were in your position, you’d do the same for me.” She walked over to her station and grabbed a couple of tissues. “Here. Wipe your face. You don’t want Tiffany to see you like this, do you?”

Olivia took the tissue and dabbed her eyes. “Thanks, sis.”

Alex nodded and walked to the front of the shop to lock the door. Everyone was gone for the day, and since she lived over the shop, the owner trusted her to lock up the salon.

Just as she reached the front door, it opened. A tall, dark man with intense black eyes entered the shop. He didn’t look like the type to frequent a beauty salon like this one. In fact, judging from his designer khakis, black Polo shirt, and Kenneth Cole shoes, he was more the kind of man who frequented only the most exclusive salons for his haircuts.

He wasn’t good-looking but had a certain something about him that made it hard for her to drag her gaze away. Even more intriguing was that Alex had the strangest feeling they’d met, but she couldn’t remember where or when. She was attracted to him. Very attracted. Regardless, she had Olivia and Tiffany to deal with right now.

She smiled at him. “I’m sorry, sir, but we’re closed, but if you’d like to make an appointment for another time I’ll be happy to take your information.” That strange familiarity was not going away.

“Alex, what are you playing at? I know we parted on bad terms, but don’t pretend you don’t recognize me. Don’t cheapen what we had. And what the hell did you do with your hair?”

Alex’s hand flew to her head, self-consciously smoothing her chin-length hair into place. Who the hell was this? Was he nuts? Suddenly, a light went off in her head. If she didn’t recognize his face, she certainly recognized his voice. It was the weirdo who’d called earlier. She felt a stab of disappointment that she could be that drawn to someone who obviously had some kind of mental imbalance.

“You’re going to have to leave.”

He moved forward. She retreated. “Don’t come any closer.” She ran to the closest workstation and snatched up the first thing she could get her hands on.

“If you take one step closer, I’m going to spray you.”

He laughed. Tall, dark, and crazy. But he had a great laugh. Why did the weirdos have to be so hot?

“You’re going to assault me with hair spray? That’s hardly threatening. Alex, c’mon, be reasonable. Put that down and let’s talk about this like two adults.” He approached her, and she pressed the button on top of the aerosol can. He lifted his arm to shield his face, and with the other arm he grabbed the container from her hand.

“Now you’re just being ridiculous, Alex. How can we work things out if you don’t give me a chance?”

“Work what out? I don’t know you.”

Olivia shouted from the back of the shop. "I'm calling the police!"

The stranger lifted his head and looked toward her sister's direction. "Olivia, talk some sense into your sister."

Alex gasped. How did this man know who they were? This was getting way too creepy. She looked over her shoulder. "O, grab Tiffany and get out of here. Go out the backdoor."

"I'm not leaving you here with that psycho." Olivia charged at him with the broom Alex had been using earlier.

Whack! The handle connected with the man's shoulder.

"Ow! Cut that out! Are you women nuts? Alex, I'm not leaving until we talk this out," he said with obvious determination, leaving no doubt in her mind he meant every word. What was his problem? When Olivia raised the flimsy broom to strike him again, he caught it, grabbed it, then snapped it in two over his knee.

Alex was truly frightened now. Were they about to die?

"Now, will you listen?" he asked impatiently.

Before she could open her mouth, Tiffany came running from the back room, mouth covered in cookie crumbs. "Mommy, I brought you some cookies." The child stopped short and smiled up at the nutcase. "Hi, are you here to get your hair done? My auntie is the best hairdresser in town."

Alex and Olivia both broke out of their stupor at the same time, each taking one of Tiffany's little shoulders and pushing her behind them. Alex's eyes darted to the stranger who had paled significantly. He looked as if he'd just seen a ghost. In fact, he almost looked like he'd faint.

"Oh, my God! Her ... her face."

Chapter Four

Alex crossed her arms. "Get out of this shop right now and never come back! What kind of insensitive jerk are you?"

"But-but her face ... it shouldn't be like that. I-I ... fixed it," Tag muttered, stunned by Tiffany's appearance. Although he hadn't been able to restore her face to exactly the way it used to be, the scarring had been so minimal that when she grew up, it'd barely be visible. But now, the little girl's face looked exactly as it had, if not worse, before he'd operated on her.

What the hell was going on, and why was Alex acting as if she'd never laid eyes on him before? And why didn't it appear *to be* an act? Something weird was happening.

The shop door opened and a little elderly woman walked through the door. She looked at him and her eyes brightened. She looked oddly familiar. "Oh, there you are. I've been looking all over for you." She smiled at him.

"You have?" he asked dumbly.

"Of course, I have, silly. You forgot to take your medication again, dearie." She turned to the two perplexed women and the child peeking from behind her mother.

"I'm sorry my son has bothered you. He ... he's not exactly well. It's been so hard for me to keep up with him since his father died, but I do my best. I'll take him off your hands, dearies."

Tag's jaw dropped. Oh, yeah, things were definitely amiss, but a niggling feeling told him that this woman somehow held the key to what was going on. He took one last look at Alex, who wore a baffled expression on her face, before he allowed himself to be led out of the salon.

The minute they stepped outside the doors and got a couple yards away from the shop, Tag turned on the old lady. "Will you tell me what the hell is going on? Why are you claiming to be my mother?"

The woman laughed. "Well, I had to think of some explanation to get you out of your predicament; otherwise, those ladies would have called the police. Look, Taggart, you were floundering and needed my help. Besides, Alexandra doesn't have a clue who you are."

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! First off, what are you talking about? And why wouldn't Alex know who I am? We've been lovers for the past year."

"Yes, you were, until your wish changed things."

This was going from ridiculous to farcical. He hated being in any situation he didn't understand. "Has the world gone nuts? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you recognize me from a few weeks ago, Taggart?" the woman asked.

He finally took a good look at her. "Holy shit. You're the crazy wish lady."

"Sort of, but haven't you ever been taught to look beyond the surface?" The most phenomenal thing happened next. Before his very eyes, she morphed into a whole new woman -- an extraordinarily beautiful woman, with curly brown hair that nearly touched the ground, a youthful face, and sparkling green eyes.

He couldn't possibly have seen what he thought he did. Or could he? "How did you do that?"

"Oh, I usually take on different forms when I leave Olympus. My real name is Psyche, by the way, but you're probably more familiar with my husband, Eros, and perhaps my monster-in-law -- I mean, my mother-in-law -- Aphrodite."

Greek mythology had been one of his interests in college, but he'd put it aside because his passion for medicine had been stronger. Either this woman was shooting up or he was in the middle of a dream because there was absolutely no way he could be standing here talking to Psyche -- the God of Love's wife.

“Tell me I’ll wake from this wacky dream or that I’m on *Candid Camera* or something, because you’re not supposed to be real.”

She sighed. “Yes, I get that a lot. Eros doesn’t really like it when I interact with humans, but I used to be human and sometimes I like to visit Earth. Anyway, I’m very much real and very much in a world of shit.”

“What?” Tag thought his head would fall off if things didn’t start to make sense soon.

“The wish you made had repercussions for me and you both. Me, because the monster-in-law may finally have some ammunition to get me tossed out of Olympus, and you, because now everything that had to do with you and Alex in the past year never happened.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, you’re the dummy who wished Alex would leave you alone and forget you. You know, when you have a love wish at your disposal, you really ought to be careful with your wording.”

It finally occurred to him exactly what she was talking about. No. It couldn’t be.

“So what you’re saying is that because of something I said in the course of an argument, it has now wiped out the past twelve months of my life?”

“It hasn’t exactly wiped out everything, just the stuff between you and Alex. That friend of hers never made the suggestion for Olivia to take Tiffany to see you. No Tiffany and Olivia, so no Alex tagging along. It’s really a shame because you’d done such a good thing for that little girl.”

“I didn’t do it for the thanks.”

“I know you didn’t, and that’s what makes you a good person. A man of your status doesn’t need to give his services away for free. A lot of people in your position never give back to the community. That’s one of the reasons I granted you that wish. I saw in you a trait that’s been lacking in mankind recently -- compassion.”

Tag raked his fingers through his hair, not believing he was actually having a conversation with a woman who was claiming to be someone from a Greek myth. “So how do we fix it? Can’t you just undo the wish?”

“It’s not that simple. Love wishes are difficult to reverse.”

“Then I’m to pay for the rest of my life for something said in anger? I never asked for the damn wish in the first place.”

“Well, you did a good deed, and I only wanted to reward you.”

“In that case, the next time I see a truck about to hit an old lady, I’ll just let it happen.”

Psyche bit her bottom lip, a look of contrition on her face. Maybe he was being a little hard on her. She couldn’t have known that he’d make such a jackass wish.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so nasty, but I’ve recently discovered that I love her. If only it hadn’t

taken her leaving for me to find out.”

“I said the wish would be difficult to reverse. I didn’t say it was impossible.”

Tag gripped Psyche by the shoulders, practically shaking her. If there was something he could do to win Alex back, he would do it. He didn’t care if he had to assassinate someone; he’d do it if only for a chance to tell her of his love. “What do I need to do? Tell me, I’m desperate.”

She laughed. “I’ll tell you if you stop shaking me.”

He let her go and waited to hear what she had to say.

“First, I think you need to calm down.”

“Lady, I’m as calm as I’m going to get, considering the situation.”

She shrugged. “Fair enough. Nothing jars the memory better than lust. You can forget events or people, but you never forget how you felt in the throes of passion. You’re going to have to make her remember what you two shared.”

“So I basically have to get her to have sex with me? How in Heaven’s name will I go about convincing her to do that when she thinks I’m certifiable?”

“I’ll think of a way. And you have to do it by Valentine’s Day or else the results of your wish will be permanent.”

“That’s next week! Are you kidding me?!”

Psyche sighed, twirling a lock of luxuriant brown hair with her finger. “I told you it would be difficult, but I’ll help you, of course. I’ll just have to come up with a plan. We both have a lot at stake here.”

“And what is yours?” Tag almost wished he’d never seen her crossing the street that day, but didn’t. It was wishing that had caused his current problems in the first place.

Psyche stopped twirling her hair, a dark brow lifting, green eyes almost appearing to emit fire. “This isn’t all about you, buddy, and if you think about it, my giving you that wish didn’t cause your problems. Your stubbornness did. Had you just admitted your feelings for Alex were based on more than just sex, had you told her why you don’t believe in marriage, you wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

“How --”

“How do I know? I live on Olympus. There’s not a lot I don’t see, and let me tell you something, buster, there aren’t a lot of women out there who would put up with you the way she did. And all she asked in return from you was a deeper commitment. The two of you already lived together, so what would have been the big deal if you did marry her? I know you’ll argue the opposite side and say that since you lived together, what did a piece of paper matter. Well, that piece of paper mattered to Alexandra, and if it didn’t to you, what would have been the harm in giving her what she wanted?” She shook a finger at him. “You really ought to be ashamed of yourself, Taggart Webster. You treated her abysmally, but she loved you, anyway. You *knew* she loved you and did things for you out of that love, which you took for granted. Now you have the audacity to rail against me when most of this is your own damn fault. If I didn’t have my own interests to consider, or the other people your selfish wish affected, I’d say to Hades with you!”

Tag felt like an asshole. Everything Psyche said was absolutely correct. His selfishness had gotten him into this mess. He'd used his childhood as an excuse and, as a result, he'd ended up losing the very best thing that had ever happened to him.

He'd never been as close to tears as he was now. "I'm sorry, Psyche," he said, and meant it.

"You've gone pale as a sheet. Come on, I see a Starbucks down the block. They make great coffee." She took his hand. "You know, they're in negotiations to open one on Olympus."

He allowed her to lead him to the coffee shop. "Why don't you get a table for us, and I'll get us both a cup of the evil brew. How do you take yours?"

"Black, just a little sugar," he said automatically. Alex used to make the best cup of coffee, knowing exactly how he liked it. Why was he now remembering all the little things? Sex had been a big factor in what he'd been missing lately, but nothing compared with the other things she'd done for him.

When Tag found an empty booth, he sat down and stared absently out the window, wondering how he could get himself out of this mess. His heart twisted when he remembered Tiffany's face. No child deserved to suffer what she had. The one thing he most remembered about dealing with the little girl was her sunny disposition. A lot of his pro bono stuff involved children, but by far Tiffany had been one of those special kids you couldn't help but like because she had a light about her that one could almost see.

And to think, because of his wish, that precious darling was probably ostracized by her peers. No one knew as well as he how cruel children could be. Hadn't he been teased mercilessly in school because of his thrift-store clothing and no-brand-name shoes?

He shuddered to think what children had to say about Tiffany. He wondered who else had been affected adversely by his ill wish. So much had happened in the year he'd been with Alex.

"Here you go. I got you a cup of the Kenyan. The coffee there is excellent." Psyche handed him his drink, then took a seat.

Tag smiled gratefully, not really wanting it, but thought it impolite to refuse.

"Now, let's think of a way to get you back with Alexandra."

"You said that you had a lot at stake in this. Care to elaborate?"

Psyche grimaced before taking a sip of her coffee. "Aphrodite has wanted to get rid of me from the very beginning. Even before I married Eros she tried to destroy me because of my appearance. I can't help the way I look, and it's certainly not my fault that people traveled from all over to pay me tribute -- tribute that she felt was rightfully hers. I never disputed that and what happened between Eros and me ... well, she would have made any woman who joined with her precious son miserable, but she hates me tenfold." She sighed. "Anyway, because she tried to finish me when it was discovered that Eros and I had married, my husband went to Zeus and asked for intervention. Although we'll never be friends, Aphrodite and I have had somewhat of a truce as long as neither one of us interferes with the other. By granting you that wish, I've broken the spirit of the truce. Because of this, I could get kicked out of Olympus. This time, Eros can't help me."

Tag's brows furrowed. He frowned, trying to make sense of what she'd just told him. "I'm not quite

following you. How did granting my wish interfere with Aphrodite?"

"You were her pet project, or at least one of them. She's the Goddess of Love and you didn't believe in love. She was working on a way to change your mind, when I inadvertently stepped on her toes by getting involved. She could go to Zeus and get me expelled from the only home I've known for the past several centuries. She's such a horrid woman sometimes, but I've been given until Valentine's Day to fix everything between you and Alex."

"If she wants you out that badly, why is she willing to wait until Valentine's Day?"

A mischievous smile crossed the brunette beauty's face. "It's February."

"And?"

"And Valentine's Day falls in it. Anyone seeking a favor from her can ask her in the month of February and not be denied. As much as she hates me, she couldn't say no to my request."

"So why didn't you ask for more time?"

"Well, that's the thing; I didn't specify how much extra time I needed. I know I should have, but I wasn't thinking clearly. The woman gets me so flustered sometimes. Valentine's Day was her stipulation."

"Damn," he muttered.

"Damn' is right." She sighed again and placed her elbows on the table, resting her chin in the center of her cupped palms.

"I hate to ask, because God knows I don't think I can take any more bad news, but what else has been affected by the wish besides what's been stated ... and Tiffany?"

Psyche shook her head, a sympathetic gleam in her green eyes. "Well, because you never met Alex or her family, Olivia used up all of her savings to take Tiffany to a doctor she could afford, but he turned out to be a hack. He messed up her daughter's face worse than before. Since there was no insurance, the subsequent hospital visits put her in serious debt. She took on another job to make ends meet. Alex's savings are slowly dwindling away because she's constantly bailing her sister out. Unless she wins the lottery, she'll never realize her dream of owning her own shop." Psyche scrunched up her face, obviously trying to remember more. "Hmm, let me think. Oh, yeah, there's also --"

Tag held up his hand, sure that he didn't want to hear another word. The last thing he needed was a laundry list of the consequences of his stupidity. "I get the picture. So what's our next move? How do you propose I get Alex alone and convince her that we're sexually compatible?"

"You leave the getting together part to me, but first tell me her likes and dislikes."

"I thought you were all-knowing," Tag taunted.

"Watch it, smart ass. My name is Psyche, not Zeus. Now, how about giving me that list so we can get your woman back?"

Chapter Five

Alex felt excited for the first time in a while. What luck it had been to receive a packet in the mail for a Valentine's weekend getaway at the downtown Washington Ritz Carlton. It was funny to have won because she didn't remember entering this particular contest, but everything had turned out to be legit. She planned on enjoying herself, and since she didn't have a significant other to share her prize with, she invited Olivia.

Her sister really needed this weekend of relaxation more than anyone, courtesy of her thankless jobs and wretch of an ex-husband. Their parents had agreed to watch Tiffany, so everything was set. Not only were she and her sister going to have the weekend getaway, but they'd also received tickets to the Annual Valentine's Day Ball, which was also at the Ritz. Some of her favorite musical acts would be performing, and all kinds of celebrities would be there. These tickets were the hottest items in town, and they'd been included in her prize pack.

She turned to her sister and held up a spaghetti-strapped, red mini dress and an even smaller strapless white dress. "So what do you think, O? Which one should I wear? I don't know why, but I just get the feeling something wonderful is going to happen to me tonight."

Olivia eyed each dress critically. "Uh, yeah. Something is definitely going to happen to you if you wear either one of those dresses."

"Oh, come on, sis, why don't you get into the spirit of things? Maybe you'll meet your Mr. Right tonight."

The other womansnorted, a derisive look on her face. "Hardly. I made a mistake once. I'm not going down that road again."

Alex placed the dresses on the king-sized bed and walked over to her sister. "Sweetie, I wish you wouldn't talk like that. Don't let that jackass, Bill, affect you this way."

"It's really hard not to. I ... I thought he was my knight in shining armor, but instead, he was only a big loser. He turned my life upside down and left me in debt without a qualm. How do you think I'm supposed to feel? I hadn't even been lucky in love before him."

"I absolutely hate that he's done this to you."

"I hate what he's done to me, too, but I especially hate what he's doing to our daughter. He hasn't so much as attempted to visit her since ..."

"I know."

Olivia sighed. "I guess I always knew what a superficial bastard he was. When I was carrying Tiffany, I'd gained some weight, of course, and he wouldn't touch me. He called me a disgusting pig. Even when I lost the weight, the name stayed because he knew how much it hurt me. I realize she's better off without him in her life, but that's hard for a six-year-old to understand."

“Then why can’t you see that he’s the one with the problem and not you? He’s an asshole, always was, and always will be. There are lots of good men out there.”

“You sound so sure, Alex.”

“I am. Look at Mom and Dad. They knew each other for only a day before they eloped. Don’t stories like that make you believe in the power of love?”

“Too blindly in your case, I’d say. You wait until it happens to you, Alex. It might not be the sweet, perfect bliss you think it will be. That kind of attitude will have you shackled up with a man as his glorified mistress.”

A shiver rippled down Alex’s spin. A strong feeling of *déjà vu* struck her and she wasn’t sure why. What did this mean? Why did that comment bother her so much? A face suddenly flashed through her mind. The man from the salon. She took a seat on the bed, careful not to sit on the dresses, her legs no longer able to support her.

“Alex, are you okay? You lost a little color there for a minute. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I ... something you said made me feel strange.”

“What?”

“The part about being a glorified mistress. That statement ... I’ve heard it somewhere recently.”

A pensive look crossed Olivia’s dark face. “That’s odd. Look, I’m not sure if I’m up to going to this party. Maybe I’ll just read a book or something.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. You’re coming to the party. You promised. Besides, that beautiful peach gown we brought would go to waste. That dress is way too fierce to just sit in a closet.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Whatever. It’s not like I can really enjoy myself. This is the first time I’ve had a weekend off in ages and I should be spending it with my daughter.”

“You spend plenty of time with her. Having a weekend getaway doesn’t make you a bad parent.”

“But didn’t you see her sad little face when I left?”

“You’re imagining things. She’s probably having a great time with Mom and Dad. She always does. You know as well as I do that they love having her over and they’ll spoil her like crazy.”

“I guess, but --”

“No buts. So are you going to tell me what dress I should wear or not?”

“Well, isn’t this a formal function? Didn’t you bring something that would cover more flesh?”

Alex giggled. "Oh, come on. These are classy dresses. Look." She held the red one up. "It has sequins around the bottom."

Olivia lifted a brow. "And the white one?"

"It's satin. Nothing is more formal than satin."

"Hmm, I'm not really sure I'd wear either one, but you certainly have the body to carry them off."

"So do you."

"Maybe so, but I don't have your flair. You could get away with wearing something like that because you have the right attitude."

"You could, too, O. I just know something fabulous will happen tonight."

"How do you know?"

"It's weird, but when I won that prize packet, I felt there was something special about it, like it was touched with magic or something. I know that sounds crazy, but I really think something good will happen, and since this is a Valentine's party, what else could it be but meeting my true love?"

"Hmm, loveschmov."

"Oh, stop it. You're the Valentines' Day equivalent of Scrooge."

"And you're naïve."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you meet a terrific man tonight."

Olivia shook her head. "I doubt it. I'm going to find the bar and I'm not moving from it until the party is over."

"We'll see." Alex laughed, unable to quell the excitement coursing through her body.

* * * * *

"Are you sure she's going to be here tonight?" Tag asked Psyche for the third time as he tugged on his bow tie. God, he hated wearing these damn things. They felt like a noose around his neck.

Psych pushed a long, curly length of hair over her shoulder. Tonight she wore a gold ball gown. Eyes looked her way the minute she'd stepped into the ballroom on Tag's arm, but she didn't appear to notice. She was one of those women who possessed a beauty so rare that when people stared, it never fazed her because she was used to it. Tag didn't know if it was wise to have so much attention in their direction, but he was only following her lead.

"Of course she'll be here tonight, Tag. She has to be."

"But you sent her two tickets. What if she brings a date?"

"You're such a worrier. You need to calm down or you'll give yourself an ulcer. Everything has been

taken care of. I do have a few connections of my own, you know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ever heard of subliminal advertising?”

“Yes. What’s that got to do with the price of tea in China?”

“It means I had some friends make subtle suggestions to her. Actually, they were invisible and she couldn’t physically hear them, but her subconscious did. If everything goes according to plan, she’s brought her sister along.”

Tag relaxed. “That’s okay, then.”

Psyche looked annoyed. “That’s it? No ‘thankyou’ for my efforts? I thought it was rather clever of me.”

He shook his head with a chuckle. Women and their egos. “Thankyou, Psyche. You’ve done a great job.”

“I should think so, considering we’re getting down to the wire. Aphrodite isn’t supposed to interfere, but she’s tricky. I know she had something to do with that long errand I was sent on a couple of days ago. The thing is I can’t prove it. Fortunately, she and Eros are now working as this is their holiday, which means I can concentrate on getting you back together with your woman.”

“My woman. I like the sound of that.” He smiled his first genuine smile in weeks because he felt hopeful. Maybe things would truly work out, after all.

A waiter walked by and offered them a glass of pink champagne. Psyche took one, but Tag declined, his gaze drifting to the entrance of the ballroom. Any minute now Alex would walk through the door.

“This party started nearly an hour ago. Where could she be?” He shifted his weight from foot to foot with impatience. The waiting was killing him. It was bad enough that he was here in this monkey suit at a function he normally wouldn’t be caught dead at, but the uncertainty of whether Alex would even show up was nearly more than he could handle.

“I know you’re anxious to see her, but you really need to relax. You know, for a doctor you’re very high-strung.” Psyche popped a bacon-wrapped scallop she’d gotten off a tray into her mouth.

“Relax? Aftermidnighttonight I could lose the woman I love, and you tell me to relax? I thought you’d be a little more concerned for yourself, too. After all, you have just as much to lose as I do.”

“More, actually.” She grabbed a cheese puff from another tray as a waiter walked by. “Mmm, these appetizers are to die for. Not as excellent as ambrosia, mind you, but pretty darn close. Yummy.”

“Are you just going to stand there and stuff your face?” Tag wanted to shake her. How could she be so calm?

“This is a party and I’m trying to enjoy myself. Anyway, if you weren’t so busy fussing at me you’d have noticed that Alex and her sister just walked in. I must say that they both look lovely tonight.” Psyche pointed toward the women and Tag’s mouth went dry.

He did a double take when he saw Alex. She looked so beautiful and so ... naked. What the hell was she thinking to wear that little red getup to a formal ball? She was practically falling out of the red mini-dress. Her curves had always been generous, but in that dress, she looked like a black BettyBoop . If her dress dipped any lower, he'd see nipples. Despite her scantily clad body, she somehow managed to look elegant with an expertly made up face, her hair pulled back in a style reminiscent of Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina* , and a look that said she was aware of her sexuality.

His cock stirred. Damn, he wanted her. His hand immediately flew to the front of his pants to cover up the result of his raging hormones. Jealousy reared its ugly head when he noticed several pairs of male eyes ogling her. Tag wanted to stalk over to her, toss her bodily over his shoulder, carry her up to his room, and fuck her until she realized that she belonged to him and only him.

“Should I go over there? How do you think she'll react when she sees me?” He turned to Psyche, who was now holding up one poor waitress as she brought shrimp to her lips.

“There's only one way to find out, and that's going over there to talk to her,” she answered with a full mouth, not bothering to turn away from the tray. The god's wife seemed more interested in stuffing her face than helping him. Tag rolled his eyes heavenward. How in the world did Eros put up with this bubblehead for two millennia?

“Aren't you supposed to be advising me?”

“I am advising you.”

“From where I'm standing, looks like you're chowing down.”

Green eyes narrowed. “If you would try these hors d'oeuvres, you'd understand. I'm going to have to put some of these bad boys into my purse to take back to Olympus. Hey, what do you think these little green squares are?” She pointed to an edible something on her napkin. The waitress, seeing the talking garbage disposal's temporary distraction, got the hell out of there.

That was it. Psyche wasn't going to be any help. He'd have to do whatever he needed to do on his own. Now if only he could figure out what that whatwas.

* * * * *

“Oh, look who's playing now! The Flow Brothers are one of my favorite groups. I can't believe they're here!” Alex squealed with excitement. The ballroom looked fantastic, a prism of lights dancing across the ceiling.

“I can't believe we're here, either,” Olivia muttered, not sounding excited in the least.

“O, snap out of it. You promised me you'd at least try to have a good time.”

“I'd have a good time if I were home with my daughter.”

Alex bit her lip to stop herself from saying something hurtful. She wasn't going to let her sister's negative energy kill her mood. Instead, she said, “If you want to hang out at the bar, go ahead. I'll just mingle and maybe I'll meet someone who actually wants to be here.”

Olivia turned to her, dark brown eyes shining with a look of regret. “I'm sorry to be such a killjoy. I just

feel so ridiculous in this dress, and why you insisted on a tiara is beyond me.”

“Because it goes great with your gown and your ’do . You are the most gorgeous woman here.”

And it was true. Olivia’s looks had been a source of envy for Alex when they were younger, but her sister didn’t have a conceited bone in her body. It was hard to stay jealous of someone who seemed so unaware of their power at times.

“Excuse me, but may I have this dance?” An extremely tall gentleman with dark hair and the greenest eyes she’d ever seen had approached them. Alex knew right away that he wasn’t talking to her, but to Olivia. His eyes were riveted to her sister’s face.

He was fine as hell. This man by far blew any Hollywood hunk out of the water in the looks department. He had a hard-looking face, appearing as though it had been sculpted from granite, which saved him from looking like a pretty boy, and thickly lashed eyes and sensual red lips that made one want to kiss them. If his gaze wasn’t glued to Olivia, Alex would definitely take him up on his offer.

“I ... I don’t dance,” her sister answered.

“Then perhaps you’ll have a drink with me?” The stranger’s voice was deep and melodic, with an almost hypnotic quality about it. There was something compelling about it that made it difficult to look away from him and, oddly enough, it wasn’t his looks. He almost had some kind of strange magnetic pull.

Olivia looked slightly uncomfortable, not meeting the man’s eyes. “No, thank you.”

Alex’s jaw dropped. Her sister was nuts. Maybe she was willing to rebuff the hottie of the century, but Alex wasn’t going to let her. “Of course, you’d like a drink. Before we got here you were talking about hanging at the bar.” She faced the hunk.

“My sister would love to have a drink with you. She’s just shy. Go on,” Alex encouraged, practically pushing the reluctant woman toward the man.

Olivia glared at her before looking up at the smooth and refined man standing in front of them. “No, please. I ... I don’t want to. I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t know you.”

The stranger smiled, revealing teeth almost too white to be real. “My name is Maxwell Sterling, and you are Olivia, am I correct?”

Olivia’s forehead wrinkled. “How do you know my name?”

“I must apologize for eavesdropping, but I noticed the two of you earlier today in the hotel lobby, and I couldn’t help but overhear a bit of your conversation. I’m glad you’re here tonight.”

A light bulb went off in Alex’s head. Was this *the* Maxwell Sterling, one of the richest men in the world and related to royalty as well? “Maxwell Sterling of Sterling International?”

He turned green eyes on her. “You’ve heard of it, of me?”

Alex snorted. “Who hasn’t?”

“Then you also know that I didn’t get where I was today by taking no for an answer,” he said. Although

the words were directed to her, his gaze remained on Olivia, who looked like she wanted to bolt. Why was her sister acting like this?

Before either woman could say another word, Maxwell took Olivia by the elbow.

“Please, I don’t want ...” Olivia began, but something in Maxwell’s eyes halted her.

Alex didn’t know what it was, but she had a feeling that something had just happened. Maxwell nodded her way before leading Olivia off. Her sister looked slightly dazed. What in the world? She sensed that whatever occurred after this ball, it wouldn’t be the last time that either of them saw him.

She chuckled, thinking that he might be the person who could give her sister the jumpstart she needed to live life again, even if it was temporary. Everyone knew Maxwell Sterling was a notorious bachelor.

Barely over her mirth, Alex turned to see a figure striding purposely toward her. At first she couldn’t make out who it was, but when she could, all traces of humor and her earlier excitement fled. With a look of pure determination flashing in his black eyes, the psycho from the salon was closing in on her.

She did the only thing she could think to do. She ran. Rushing out of the ballroom, Alex headed for the elevators, not daring to look back. If she could just make it to the lobby on the first floor, she could notify security. Frantically pushing the down button, Alex stole a look over her shoulder. Thankfully, he was nowhere in sight. She breathed a sigh of relief when the elevator door opened.

Home free. She walked in and leaned against the back wall, but her respite was short-lived when a body came barreling through the doors just before they closed.

She screamed. “No!”

Chapter Six

Just as the shriek tore from Alex’s throat, the elevator began to rumble and the lights flickered. Tag had only experienced this one other time and that was the morning of his wish. Were things back to normal already?

Alex reached out for the button pad, stabbing the “door open” button impatient fingers. Nothing. No movement. No sound. She pushed at more buttons without much effect. “No, please tell me I’m not stuck in this elevator with this nut,” she muttered, sounding frantic.

Tag knew without a doubt that other forces were at work. So, Psyche had come through, after all. He crossed his arms, triumph swelling his chest. Tag grinned, leaning against the wall. “I don’t think pushing those buttons is going to do you any good. I believe we’re stuck.”

She ignored him and started pummeling the doors. “Help! Somebody help me! I’m stuck in the elevator with a madman!”

“If you keep screaming like that, Alex, you’re going to lose your voice.”

She turned on him, a snarl on her lips. “Who the hell asked you? Why did you follow me, anyway?”

“Because I had to find a way to talk to you.”

“What could you possibly say to me that I’d want to hear? Why are you bothering me again? Did you take your medication this morning?”

“Could you at least hear me out before you hurt yourself banging on the doors?” he asked impatiently.

“No.” She opened the panel over the buttons and pulled out the emergency phone. “Oh, no, it’s dead,” she cried in dismay.

Tag smiled. Now there was no escaping him, and that was exactly how he wanted it. “Alex, could you please listen to me for five minutes?”

“No, just leave me alone. Pretend I’m not here.”

“I can’t do that. You’re the reason why I’m at this ball in the first place.”

“Why me? Why did you have to use your psycho vibes to zero in on me?”

Tag grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her gently against the wall. “First of all, you need to take it easy.”

“Take it easy? I’m stuck in an elevator with a lunatic and you tell me to take it easy? If its money you want, I don’t have my purse with me, but you can have my earrings. They’re real rubies, just don’t hurt me.”

He sighed, momentarily closing his eyes. What could he say that might get through to her? There had to be something. “I would never hurt you.”

“How would I know that? I don’t know you from Adam.”

“Yes, you do. You just don’t remember me. Look, why don’t you have a seat because it looks like we’ll be here for a while.”

“I’ll stand, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged out of his jacket and laid it on the floor, sitting down on it and loosening his bowtie. “What does it matter, anyway? My life doesn’t really seem worth living right now.”

This statement seemed to get her attention. “What are you talking about?”

“If I told you the truth, you’ll probably call me psycho again.”

“I think that’s already been established, so you might as well tell me since it looks like we’ll be stuck here.” She folded her arms across her full breasts and leaned against the wall, her skirt riding up succulent thighs.

Tag's mouth watered. He wanted to bury his head between those chocolate thighs and taste her honeyed sweetness. He missed eating her pussy and hearing the little sounds she made in the back of her throat when he did it. He ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips.

"Alex, what I have to tell you may sound crazy, but I don't know how else you're going to believe me."

"I seriously doubt I'll believe you no matter what you say, but since we're trapped I have no choice but to listen."

He took a deep breath and crossed his fingers. Here went nothing. "You and I met over a year ago, but that's not where the story really begins. It starts with an angry, bitter young boy who lived in hell for the first seventeen years of his life. He was the oldest of seven children and watched his mother go through various men, and four marriages, all of which were dysfunctional relationships. There was a time, a little over a year and a half, in which this boy was also in foster care. In the first home he was placed, his foster parents seemed nice. They appeared to be the kind of couple everyone liked and tried to emulate, but ..." he broke off, still angry over the experience.

"But behind closed doors, the man was a sadistic bastard and his wife did nothing. Not for herself and certainly not for the boy. Her husband flaunted his affairs in her face, and sometimes even brought his girlfriends home in the guise that the women were only good friends. The boy once asked his foster mother why she simply accepted the man's behavior. She told him that she'd made a commitment to stay with her husband for better or worse -- an answer that served to solidify the boy's highly unfavorable impression of marriage, which had already been indelibly etched in his mind from his own family's experiences." It was painful reliving all these old memories, but Alex needed to know where he came from and why he was so adamant about not marrying. This was what he'd never shared with her, never wanted to discuss. Until it had been too late.

Tag looked at Alex, and saw that she waited for him to finish.

"Then what happened to the boy?"

"He soon went to another foster home because he dared to question his foster mother's reasons for staying in a dysfunctional marriage. This time, he was with his new family for nearly a year. It was the first time in a long while since he'd allowed himself to let his guard down. The couple treated him like he was their own son. There was finally someone the boy could look up to, and the foster mother ... well, she was everything the boy had ever wanted in his real mother. The man and woman seemed to have the perfect marriage. After a time, the boy began to believe the hype about love was true. Until one day his foster mother got careless. She'd obviously forgotten that the boy had a half day at school -- he came home and found her sprawled out on the couch, naked, with her husband's best friend. Their eyes met before the boy walked out of the room without saying a word. Later that night, when her husband was asleep, she begged the boy not to say anything, even going as far as to offer herself to him to ensure his silence. It sickened him. Disgusted him. Since then, he has believed that anyone would have to be insane to enter into matrimony, especially when it seems like the only thing married people do is lie and hurt each other."

Alex slid down to the floor, tugging her dress over her thighs as far as it would go. "That's awful, but I don't believe all marriages are like that. You were that boy, weren't you."

It wasn't really a question but he answered anyway. "Yes," he said quietly. He'd broken out into a cold sweat just thinking about his painful childhood.

“As sad as your story sounds, I still fail to see why you’re telling me all this.”

“You’ll see. There’s more to the story.” Tag could tell she was softening toward him, which meant his plan to get her back by opening up to her was starting to work. “So, after I caught my foster mother cheating on her husband, and after she propositioned me, things were never quite the same. I hated them both. I hated her for doing something so despicable to someone who obviously worshiped the ground she walked on, and I hated him for not seeing through her pack of lies.”

“What happened after you left their home? You said you were only in foster care for about a year or so.”

“My mother came back with husband number four, vowing to be a better mother. Not unexpectedly, that turned out to be a bunch of bull. The bastard beat the shit out of her, but she took it because she’s the type of woman who can’t be without a man. She cried more about that worthless piece of shit than over her own children. We didn’t have any food in the house because he blew the welfare check on drinking and drugging. After he and I got into a huge fight, he took off. You’d think things would be better with him gone, but they went from bad to worse. According to my mother, I’d ruined her life, so I left. I’ve worked very hard to get to where I am today without anyone’s help, and those years taught me a very valuable lesson. If I were to ever settle down into a relationship, it would be on my terms, and marriage and children wouldn’t be part of it. I didn’t want end up in a situation that made me feel trapped.”

“And you think marriage would make you feel that way?”

“Definitely. I don’t have any good examples to go by.”

“My parents have been married for thirty-five years. They’re happy. I’m not saying they never had problems. I mean, I think there was one time when they were going through a really bad patch, so bad, in fact, that I thought they’d break up, but they didn’t.”

He snorted. “They stayed together for the sake of you and your sister, I suppose? There’s nothing worse than two people trying to stay together for the sake of children. The only thing that that accomplishes is that no one is happy and the children end up in therapy when they’re older.”

“I agree, but no, that wasn’t the reason they stayed together.”

“Then what kept them together when so many other marriages fail?”

“Their genuine love and mutual respect for each other. I think many marriages end in divorce because the couples didn’t love each other in the first place. They probably saw getting married as something to do, rather than a real commitment, when what they should really have done was cut their losses before walking down the aisle together.”

“And can you explain love?”

She shrugged. “In my opinion, I don’t think love is wanting to be with someone because of who they are; it’s wanting to be with someone *despite* who they are.”

Tag had never looked at it from that angle before, but it made sense. He’d always been under the impression that Alex was one of those women who’d dreamed of marriage just for the sake of a wedding, and likely had planned it down to last detail from the age of five. He’d underestimated her,

hadn't realized that she had such a mature view about love or the institution of marriage. More and more now, it appeared that *he* had been the childish one.

"I think that's a good philosophy, Alex."

"Thanks. I think it's the right one."

There was a brief pause before either of them spoke again.

"I no longer believe you're a psychotic maniac, but I do believe you owe me an explanation as to how you know so much about me and why you insist we were lovers."

"Do you believe in magic, Alex?"

"Like David Copperfield?"

"No. The real kind. You're going to have to suspend your disbelief while I tell you the rest of this story."

"I ... I don't know. You're not a Satanist, are you?"

He grimaced. "No. I'm just a normal guy who is living through some extraordinary events."

"Please don't say anything that will make me question your mental welfare again. I want to believe that you're normal, but this talk of magic isn't helping."

"*I am* normal, I just happened to land in a not-so-normal mess." He ran his hand through his hair. "You see, the reason I reacted the way I did when I saw your niece's face was because I operated on her over a year ago."

Her brow furrowed; it was obvious she was confused. "I don't understand."

"She was bitten by a rattlesnake, right? Olivia's friend suggested that she bring Tiffany to see me because I'm a plastic surgeon. I do some pro bono work, mostly facial reconstruction and breast augmentation for cancer survivors, as well as help people who were badly scarred by other plastic surgeons or doctors. You accompanied them for their first consultation with me."

"Now you're going all batty on me again."

"Bear with me, it's the truth. I operated on Tiffany, and she was almost as good as new when I finished. You and I began dating after that, and eventually you moved into my home. We lived together for a year, but then you began pressing for marriage. Because of my past, I wouldn't discuss it. I believed that I could keep you on my own terms, and you'd stay with me. I guess I wanted to have my cake and eat it, too."

He paused to see how she was handling these new disclosures. She just stared at him with folded arms, not speaking, so he took it as an encouraging sign. At least she wasn't calling him a liar or a freak.

Tag continued. "About a month ago, I met a woman whose life I had just saved. In her gratitude, she said she'd grant me a wish. At the time, I thought she was simply a fruitcake so I dismissed her words. The next morning, you and I had another of our arguments, so I said I wished you'd leave me alone and forget about the whole getting-married thing. I guess I didn't choose my words very wisely, and I'd

certainly forgotten about the crazy woman and what she'd said about a wish. It was only after you were gone from my life, all traces wiped out, did I realize how much I love you. It also turns out that the woman did have the power to grant me the wish -- she's Psyche -- Cupid's wife."

"Now I know you're making that up," she said, eyes wide, head shaking in patent disbelief.

"I hardly believe it myself, but the proof is right here. You don't remember me at all, and I only have until midnight to get you to recall what we had together."

Alex stumbled to her feet. "No. This can't be possible. You're lying."

Tag stood, too, moving so that he was mere inches away from her. He had to convince her! "Then how do I know so much about you? How do I know your name is Alexandra Renee Harrison, age twenty-four? You have one sister, Olivia Robinson, formerly married to William Robinson. Your parents, Jacqué and Frank, live in Northeast D.C. You have a niece, Tiffany, age six."

"Anyone can look up stuff like that on the Internet or through some kind of vital statistics registry."

"Then how do I know that Tiffany wants to be a ballerina when she grows up? Or that your dream is to one day open your own beauty salon? You realized you wanted to be a hairdresser because you used to style all your Barbie dolls' hair with celebrity do's you saw in magazines. You have a heart-shaped mole just below your right breast." He lifted a brow. "Should I go on?"

"This can't be. No. You ... I ... how ..."

"You broke your arm when you were sixteen after you tried to sneak out of your house to meet a boy your parents forbade you to meet. You had a dog named Lucky who got hit by a car on three different occasions, but the last time he didn't live up to his namesake. More?"

Alex looked stunned. "Stop. Just stop. This ... this can't be happening. I mean, in the back of my mind, you seem familiar to me, but I still don't ... can't ... believe it."

"Believe it, Alex, because it's true. Believe in my love for you -- our love for each other."

"But I don't know you. I can't know you," she sputtered, looking as pale as any black woman with her complexion could.

"You do know me, and I can make you remember me," he said, growing bolder in his desperation, moving closer until his body crowded hers against the elevator wall.

Her eyes widened even more. There was a hint of fear in their depths, but there was also desire. That was the emotion he was most interested in, what he needed to fan to a blaze.

"How will you get me to remember?"

"Like this." He lowered his head and captured her lips. She placed her hands against his chest, probably to push him away but, at the last minute, she didn't. Instead, Alex clutched a fistful of his shirt, holding him tightly against her. God, he'd missed the feel of her warm lips beneath his -- missed their sweetness.

It was heaven, pure and simple. *This* was his true purpose in life, to be with this woman, here and now. He placed palms against the wall on either side of her head, his tongue coaxing satiny lips apart. She

opened to him, and his tongue swept in to sample the honeyed recesses of her mouth.

Dear Lord, she was intoxicating. His cock grew impossibly hard, aching for action, burning to get what it had been denied these past few weeks. Long, painful weeks. Tag lifted his head slightly to look at her, to make sure she was real and that he wasn't going to wake up from some lovely dream. "You're so beautiful, Alex."

"Just ... just kiss me. No more words are needed." She raised her hand to cup the back of his head, bringing it down to hers. This time, her tongue snaked out to meet his, swirling it around and twining with his tongue. Tag pulled his head back, intending to nibble her bottom lip, knowing that it drove her crazy with lust. His teeth gently gnawed at its fullness.

"Oh, God, yes," she sighed. Fingers plowed deeper into his hair. She pressed her body against his. An overwhelming heat seared through his body. Tag sucked her lip roughly into his mouth. If they were going to do it like this, fuck here, it had to be raw and dirty.

Tag gripped her forearms, digging his fingers into her tender flesh, before thrusting his tongue back into her mouth. He sought every corner and crevice, tasting and savoring. Delicious. Absolutely delicious.

When he nipped her tongue with his teeth, she released a shocked gasp, but he immediately tugged it into his mouth. Not bothering to lift his head, Tag twirled her around to the adjoining wall, pinning her body against it. His tongue traced the seam of her lips.

Alex threw her head back, offering her neck to him like a virgin sacrifice to a blood-thirsty vampire.

"You're so damn hot, Alex. You have no idea. I've missed this so much, missed *you* so much." No woman had ever driven him to such animalistic passion. The more she gave in to his sexual demands, the more he wanted to take. He trailed his lips down the side of her throat, using tongue and teeth, wanting to make her very much aware that there would never be another man for her. He wanted to brand her, possess her, make her his woman all over again.

"Tag! That feels so good," she moaned, yanking on his hair. He knew the effect he was having on her by her maddening little sighs and impassioned moans, but he wanted her to know the effect she had on him, too.

It suddenly dawned on him that she'd said his name, almost instinctively. This could only mean one thing -- she was on her way to remembering him. He couldn't let up now, not when he was so close to making her his once again.

"Feel what you do to me, babe." He took one of her hands, dragging it down the length of his body until it reached his cock. He ground himself against her hand. Tag wanted the sensation of that hand on his bare skin.

"You're so hard," she said in wonder.

"That's right. It's what you do to me, babe. Take me out of my pants. I want you to touch it."

Alex looked at him with uncertainty in her eyes, hesitating for only a moment, before tentative fingers undid his pants and pulled out his cock, circling it.

"That's it, babe, stroke me. Please."

Her grip tightened around his shaft, her fist sliding up and down his length. "Your cock is so thick." Alex's pink tongue snaked out to wet her kiss-ravaged lips. "And hard."

"You're responsible for that. You've always had this effect on me."

Her head shot up, their eyes locking. Did he see a hint of recognition, or was it just wishful thinking on his part?

"I want to taste," she whispered, squeezing her fingers around his swollen length.

"There'll be plenty of time for that. I'm going to fuck you first."

Chapter Seven

How had this happened? How had she ended up in an elevator with a man she'd thought was crazy?

Alex couldn't remember a time when she'd enjoyed someone handling her so roughly or even talking to her like this, but she found that she liked it. Maybe it was the hidden freak in her. Whatever the reason, he was hot and she was horny.

Or maybe she was the crazy one. After all, random sex -- with a stranger, no less -- wasn't something she normally did. But this man drew her to him somehow. Logically, she realized she shouldn't believe his sob story or that some crazy wish had changed the course of their lives over the past year, but there was a surprising ring of truth to it that she couldn't easily dismiss. Besides, *how* did he know so much about her?

The feral gleam in his black eyes made her shiver. And his touch ... it felt right, familiar, perfect. She wanted him very badly.

Tag's hand slowly inched up her thigh, pushing her skirt to her waist. Alex cried out when his fingers dipped between her legs, rubbing the silky material of her thong against her clit. She grew damp with her need for him. "Oh, God," she moaned.

"You like this?"

"Need you ask?"

"I like hearing you say the words."

Somehow she knew that. But how did she know that?"

"I love it, Tag. More," she begged. In one deft move, he gripped the thong on both sides and ripped it

off her hips and tossed it aside. "You won't be needing this for the rest of the night," he growled.

His take-charge attitude turned her on like no other man had. Fingers delved between the folds of her hot, slick pussy.

Alex leaned her head against the wall with a groan. "Yes, Oh, God, yes."

"You're so wet, Alex. How does this feel?" He thrust his fingers harder and deeper into her.

She moved her hips, grinding herself over his hand. "It feels wonderful."

"I bet it tastes wonderful, too." He brushed his lips over hers, then slid down the length of her body until he was kneeling before her, his head inches away from her throbbing cunt.

Tag pushed her leg further apart. Alex gripped his shoulders, her knees suddenly feeling weak. When his tongue touched her clit, she thought she'd burst into flames. "That's it, just like that!" If this wasn't decadent, she didn't know what was. The Aerosmith song, *Love in an Elevator*, popped into her mind. She had enjoyed that song when it had been popular, but now that she was actually experiencing it herself, she knew that if she ever heard it again, she'd relive this moment in excruciatingly fabulous detail.

Possibly getting caught added yet another thrill to what was happening between them. Who knew when this elevator would start to function again? It could be hours or a matter of seconds. Anyone seeing them would instantly know what they were up to with just a look, but that thought didn't bother her in the least. Besides, she could barely think about anything except that his mouth was ravaging her pussy.

He slid his middle finger into her while sucking on her throbbing button. She mashed her pussy against his face. Hot. She felt so hot. The delicious things he was doing to her were like nothing she'd ever experienced.

"Don't stop," she pleaded. Was she making those noises? That hoarse, impassioned groan?

When teeth nipped her clit, she let out a little yelp.

Tag lifted his head. "Too rough?"

"Never!"

He chuckled and ran his tongue over her slick labia. "Somehow I knew you'd like it. You've always liked it when I do this." An electric jolt shot up her body. "And you always like this, too." Tag nibbled gently at her sensitive bud, his fingers still embedded deeply within her damp sheath. Alex couldn't keep still, wiggling under his mouth's ministrations. "And you absolutely loved *this*," he said before he drew her clit into his mouth again, suckling it. Hard.

"Fuck me, Tag! I don't think I can take anymore of this torture. I want your cock inside me. Now!" He couldn't drive her mad like this and not expect her to burn to ashes.

Tag took his time releasing her clit, giving it one final kiss before getting to his feet. He forced his body against hers, jamming her back into the wall. Alex wrapped her arms around his neck as his head descended toward hers.

Their kiss was hungry, urgent, and needy, their tongues dueling for supremacy in a timeless dance of lust

and passion. She could taste herself on his tongue, and it was intoxicating. So close; she was nearing a torrid peak. Tag's hard cock was suddenly there, pressing against her slit, demanding entrance.

She tore her mouth away from his. "Give it to me!"

"You're going to get it, babe."

Alex had always cringed whenever a man called her "baby" or "babe," but coming from Tag, it somehow sounded just right.

He grabbed her thigh, lifting it just enough to let his cock slide into her. "Jesus, you're wet. You're so hot and tight, as if your pussy was made especially for my cock."

"Mmm." She moaned, unable to think clearly, much less articulate anything intelligible. All she could do was revel in the deliciousness of his thick cock inside her. It felt almost like she'd done this with him before.

"Hold on tight, babe. I want you to wrap your legs around my waist. I need to get as deep as I can into your juicy pussy."

There was no way she could deny him. She gripped his shoulders in a vise as Tag cupped her ass, raising her so that her legs could circle him. He bucked, his hips driving his cock in to the hilt. The exquisite sensation of his cock stretching her so wonderfully made her squeal with delight. "Fuck me! Fuck me hard!"

She needed to feel more of his naked skin against her. Letting go of his shoulders, she ripped open his shirt, revealing a very masculine chest; her eyes feasted on a light dusting of black curls over his well-toned pectoral muscles. As she ran her hand over the hard planes of his body, his flesh seemed to throb beneath her touch.

Alex buried her face in his throat, kissing and nibbling his heated skin.

He groaned. "God, Alex, you have no idea what you're doing to me."

She sucked on the side of his neck, wanting to leave her mark on this sexy man. She did know exactly what she was doing to him, and it made her feel extremely empowered. Her legs tightened around him as his cock ground forcefully into her.

Tag's fingers dug into the tender flesh of her ass, squeezing and kneading. She bit into skin, breaking through the delicate tissue. She hadn't meant to hurt him, but Alex was so caught up in the heat of the moment that she couldn't help herself.

Tag growled. "You little vixen. So you like to bite? Well, I do, too." He captured her lower lip between his strong white teeth and gently bit into the already sensitive flesh.

She was sure her lips would be as swollen and large as Angelina Jolie's by the time this was over, but Alex was so highly aroused, pain didn't enter into the equation. He released her lip before turning his attention to her face, raining kisses over it.

"God, I can't get enough of you, woman. You'll never know how much I've missed this sweet pussy of yours."

Alex clenched her vaginal muscles around his cock, milking it. "Do you like that?"

"Oh, yeah," he responded breathlessly, before mashing his lips against hers. "So sweet," Tag muttered against her mouth.

She writhed against him, her body on an upward spiral of intense sensation.

Tag's cock pounded savagely into her pussy. His nails scraped her ass cheeks when he tightened his grip on her. He lifted his head. She looked into his dark, molten gaze just as a powerful climax surged through her body. She screamed and kept on screaming until he covered her mouth with his. Her orgasm was so strong that she shook, unable to stop herself.

"Oh, hell, yes!" he shouted, tearing his lips from hers, signaling his own release. A stream of come shot up her channel.

She held on to him, her head falling weakly on one broad shoulder. "Oh, Tag, I love you."

Tag sagged weakly against her, then his head popped up. Did he hear her correctly? Had she just said that she loved him? "Alex?!"

She lifted her head, beautiful light-brown eyes locked with his. "Yes, Tag?"

"Did you just say what I think you did?"

"That I love you?"

"Yes. Did you really say it or am I dreaming?" he asked anxiously. He pulled her away from the wall, allowing her to unwind her legs from his middle. She nearly collapsed when her feet touched the floor, but he quickly grabbed her waist, keeping her steady. "Are you okay?"

She giggled. "I am now. You can hardly expect my legs to support me after a performance like that."

Tag gripped her tighter, desperately wanting the answer to his question. "Alex, did you mean what you said?"

A slow smile tilted her swollen lips. "Yes. I remember, Tag. I remember everything. I remember you and the year we spent together."

He felt like crying in relief. Cupping her face in his hand, he stared deeply into her eyes, trying to gauge her emotions. "Tell me this isn't a dream, my beautiful lover, my friend," he said, lips brushing lightly against hers.

"It's not a dream, Tag. I do remember, although everything is a little jumbled in my head right now."

There was so much he wanted to tell her but, first and foremost, he had one thing *he had* to say. "Alex, I love you so much. My life wouldn't have much meaning if you weren't in it, as I learned painfully this past month."

Alex's eyes welled with unshed tears. "Do you mean it?"

"More than anything. I didn't realize what a precious jewel I had in you until I lost you. From now on, it's going to be whatever you want. We'll get married, a big fancy wedding, if you'd like. I want whatever you want."

Alex laughed. "Whoa, cowboy! How about we settle for a fifty-fifty relationship? Besides, I never asked for a big fancy wedding. All I ever really wanted was your love and commitment. If you're really adverse to the marriage thing, then I can live with that now that I know you love me, too."

"You have it and more, babe, but I must insist on getting married. I'm not going to let you walk out on me so easily again."

"Technically, I never did. How strange is this? I can remember events from my year with you and the one without you."

"Side effect from the magic, maybe? Who knows? Perhaps the memories that weren't supposed to happen will eventually fade. I hope they will."

"Could be, but when I compare the two, I know my life was much better with you in it. It wasn't the material things that you provided, either. It was always you. Just you." She gave him a quick kiss.

"I know what you mean. I went through hell this past month. I'm sorry for the arrogant way I brushed your feelings aside, as though they were inconsequential. I hope that I can become the man you deserve."

A tear escaped from the corner of her eye. "Oh, Tag. You don't know how good it feels to actually hear you say that. For the longest time I thought that you were somehow ashamed of me because you wouldn't introduce me to your family or even talk about them."

"I could never be ashamed of you, my love. I never told you about my family because I didn't want you to think less of me. I came from poor white trash. Don't get me wrong. I care for them as much as I'm able to, but I've always faced the fact that my mother is an alcoholic and sometimes drug user who refuses to get help. She was never much of a mother, and we only see each other every other year, if that. The last time I heard from her, she was shackled up with yet another biker."

He took a deep breath. Sharing his past was obviously painful for him. Alex waited patiently for him to continue, giving him as much time as he needed. Tag grimaced before continuing. "My two sisters are both living off the system with about seven kids between the two of them. Two brothers are in prison, one is in a mental institution, and the remaining one says he wants a better life but doesn't do anything to achieve it. I can only help them so much. When they come to me for money, I give it to them but, frankly, I don't think you'll be surprised to know that I'm not particularly close to any of them."

"That's really sad."

Tag shrugged. "I've grown used to it. Do you understand now why I didn't want to expose you to them? Maybe deep down I always knew that I loved you, but was too afraid to admit it." He wiped away the trail her tears had made.

"Tag, that's what love is all about -- sharing in each other's lives, the good and bad."

"I know that now. With you by my side, I can face anything." He kissed her again, heart swelling so

overwhelmingly with love it almost hurt.

Her soft lips beneath his were enough to make his cock stiffen once again. Alex must have felt it pressing against her, because she tossed her head back with a laugh. "Are you ready again so soon?"

"Will that be a problem?" he asked, placing a gentle kiss against her jawbone.

"Definitely not," she murmured. "There is one thing, though."

"What's that?" He lifted his head to look into her eyes.

"This time, I want us to make love."

Tag smiled. "I believe that can be arranged." He drew back, taking Alex's hand and guiding her down until they were both kneeling on his tuxedo jacket on the floor, facing each other.

Tag wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace, reveling in the scent of her tangy perfume while dropping kisses on top of her head. He never wanted to let her go. Her small hand glided up and down his back, rubbing and kneading his muscles. He released his grip on her waist only so he could push the straps of the red dress down her shoulders. Then he yanked the bodice down, revealing two perfect brown globes capped with large, dark, puckered nipples. His mouth watered at just the thought of tasting them, and his shaking hands cupped the generous mounds. "You have such a beautiful body. I was so damn jealous earlier, watching all of those men ogling you, wanting you."

"But there was obviously no one for me but you," she said teasingly.

"Damn right, just like you're the only one for me." He dipped his head and took one succulent peak into his mouth.

Alex groaned. "That feels wonderful, Tag."

He laved and circled the taut tip with his tongue until her body visibly trembled. He wanted this to be slow and easy, but his cock ached so badly for some more of her sweet pussy that he didn't know if he'd be able to last very long without sinking between her chocolate thighs again.

He loved the sound of her sighs and moans, aware that she was as turned on as he was. Tag transferred his attention to her other nipple, flicking it first, then taking it into his mouth. He squeezed and shaped the breast he'd just suckled with his free palm.

Alex groaned. "Tag, I need you inside of me, right now!"

He took his time lifting his head before meeting her eyes. "So soon? I thought you wanted to make slow, sweet love."

"Maybe sweet, but right now, I can't handle slow. I want your cock in this pussy. Now, now, now!"

He chuckled. "So eager and demanding. I think I like this new, bossy you." Tag pushed Alex onto her back, then positioned himself over her, his arms supporting the bulk of his weight. His straining cock pressed against her moist folds. "Take me inside of you, Alex," he commanded softly.

Tentative fingers reached between their bodies and encircled his cock. It took every ounce of his

willpower to remain still. Alex lifted her hips and guided his shaft to her dripping wet cunt. She parted her labia with her fingers and gently pulled his cock forward until it rested at her entrance.

Unable to hold back any longer, Tag slid into her damp heat. He hissed with pleasure. She felt so good. It was like the first time for him all over again. Every time he made love to her it felt like the first time.

He buried himself inside of her until his balls rested against her rear end. The delicious fulfillment he felt from joining as one with the woman he loved was like no other experience. He looked down at her. So beautiful. Tag felt like the luckiest man in the world to find this priceless gem among women. The woman he'd risk life and limb for. The woman who had taught him the true meaning of love.

Tag lay on top of her and clutched her hands, their fingers interlocking as he moved within her. "I love you." He didn't think he could ever say it enough.

"I love you, too." Her pussy clenched around his cock like a vacuum, sucking him deeper inside of her. His love for Alex further intensified the desire he felt for her. Tag lunged forward. She moaned, whispering words of adoration and lust, her head rolling back and forth. He couldn't get enough of the sight or scent of her.

"Yes!" she screamed. "I'm coming!"

"Oh, God!" he cried as his seed exploded into her. When he finished pumping the last drop, Tag wrapped his arms around her pliant body. "I love you, Alexandra Harrison," he said again, kissing her sweat-slickened forehead.

"And I love you. More than anyone or anything else, Taggart Webster."

Just then, the elevator doors flew open, and standing outside was a handful of people, one of whom was wearing a gold ball gown, a satisfied smile on her face and flashing the thumbs up sign. A few of the shocked onlookers gawked at them with fascination.

Tag shielded Alex's body with his own, more embarrassed for her than for himself. However, when he heard her giggle, he knew that everything would be okay. They could face any adventure as long as they were together.

Now he had to figure out who the hell had just snapped a picture.

Epilogue

"Can I be a bridesmaid, Auntie Alex?" Tiffany asked, turning her pretty little face toward her aunt.

Tag sat back in his chair, belly full from a huge dinner Alex's mother, Jacqué, had cooked in celebration of their engagement. He couldn't remember a time when he'd been happier. The Harrison family had welcomed the news with a round of hugs and kisses.

"It's about time, boy," her father, Frank Harrison, had said.

Things had certainly changed since the night at the hotel a couple of weeks ago. Alex's shining black hair hung past her shoulders once again, for one. For another, Psyche had fixed things to the point where

Alex didn't remember the argument they'd had when he'd uttered those fateful words or the alternate year without him. The month they'd been apart never happened, and she hadn't even remembered the things he'd told her about Psyche and the wish. As far as Alex knew, they'd gone to the Valentine's Day ball together with her sister, and the only other things Alex had recalled were everything they'd discussed in the hotel elevator, plus the two of them getting caught in it after an incredibly mind-blowing sexual interlude.

Tag looked studied Tiffany's face. The side he had operated on looked just as it was supposed to. Olivia seemed to be thriving as well. Something must have happened to her at the ball, too, although she refused to talk about it. Alex had mentioned a man, Maxwell Sterling, that her sister had met, but she couldn't get any more information from her sister, either.

He turned to the woman he adored, who looked more beautiful with each passing day. He loved her more than could be put into words. Ever since he'd opened his heart to her, he didn't know how he'd survived before she had come into his life. She was his everything -- the first thing he thought about when he woke and the last thing he thought about before he went to sleep. The one thing he regretted and felt ashamed of most was how long it had taken him to realize how much she meant to him and what he had had to go through to finally acknowledge his feelings.

Because of her, he'd even reached out to his family again. She'd showed him that throwing money at them in the hopes that they'd go away would never solve their problems in the long run. So he tried to make a more conscious effort to be in their lives. Maybe his siblings would never change, but he could at least be a positive influence on his various nieces and nephews.

Tag grabbed her hand under the table, giving it a light squeeze. Alex turned to him with a smile, mouthing the words, *I love you* .

"Auntie Alex, are you listening to me? I want to be a bridesmaid in your wedding." Tiffany huffed, sounding slightly exasperated.

"Of course, I am, darling, but wouldn't you rather be a flower girl? I could have a dress made for you that looks just like my wedding dress, and we could give you a little tiara or put flowers in your hair. You'd look really pretty."

Tiffany shook her head, pigtails flying as usual. "I don't want to be a flower girl because that's for babies. I'm a big girl now. I'm going to be seven next week."

Tag threw his head back and laughed. "Spoken like a woman who knows her mind. I think the final decision is up to your aunt, but how about a junior bridesmaid?"

The child's face lit up. "Oh, Uncle Tag. I think that sounds like a super idea. What do you think, Auntie?"

Alex smiled. "I think that's a super idea, too." She leaned over and gave her niece a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Of course, O, you're going to have to be my maid of honor."

Olivia smiled. "I think I can handle that as long as you don't do anything crazy like throwing the bouquet my way."

"Why not?" Alex asked.

She shrugged. "Once was enough, thank you, and I haven't met anyone who could make me change my mind yet."

Tag studied his soon-to-be sister-in-law and got the distinct impression that she wasn't exactly telling the truth, and that certain Maxwell Sterling might have a lot to do with it. No matter, it was none of his business. Olivia was a woman with a good head on her shoulders. He suspected that whatever problem she had would be worked out soon enough.

"Do you know what your colors are going to be?" Jacqué asked, standing up to clear the dishes.

Her husband groaned and got up abruptly. "This sounds like women's talk. I'm going to take out the trash. Tag, I'd make my escape if I were you. Good luck, son." With that, the older man left the kitchen as if the devil himself were on his heels.

Tag laughed. He had no intention of leaving. Indeed, most men would not involve themselves with their own wedding plans, but he knew how much his input meant to Alex. He listened to the women at the table talking excitedly, full of various ideas, and nodded at appropriate intervals, letting them chatter away. He couldn't wait for the big day to come, when the law would cement their strong bond.

He knew that in his and Alex's hearts, they were already married, but Tag wanted to bind her to him in all ways. Who would have thought that a simple wish would change this many things in his life and make it so wonderful? Sure, he had had to go through hell to win back Alex, but if he hadn't made that wish, he would never have opened up to her and discovered all the sweet mysteries of love.

Tag put his arm around Alex's shoulder and smiled as he listened to her plans for them. If marriage was a prison, he hoped his jailer would lock him up and throw away the key.

* * * * *

Psyche looked down on Taggart Webster and Alexandra Harrison-soon-to-be-Webster with a sense of triumph racing through her. Despite all her mother-in-law had done to thwart her efforts, these two were together and happy. The love she observed between the two of them warmed her heart. It was the kind of passion she felt for her own husband.

She didn't have the ability to see in the future like some of the gods and goddesses could, but from her observations of this couple, she knew their love would last.

Eve Vaughn

Eve Vaughn enjoys writing above all else. She began writing short stories to amuse herself since she could form letters. Mischievous as a child, she lost her television privileges quite a bit and found writing to

be her outlet. Besides writing, Eve likes reading, baking, volunteering, traveling, and spending time with her family. She currently resides in the Philadelphia area with her husband and turtle.

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