

~ California Gold ~

by Carole Giorgio

Violence Warning/Disclaimer: Some during the course of the entire story, but it is taken care of as quickly as possible.

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

Standard Disclaimer: I really don't need a disclaimer because these gals belong to me. This is an Uber story so the physical appearance of the main characters will probably be very familiar to the reader. The main setting is still Laguna Beach, California with trips to other localities. The names of some of the places depicted are real, although the actual settings may be embellished and names changed for the reader's enjoyment and to cover the author's behind. It is a present time love story.

Kudos: To my lover (who spent/spends many hours by herself while this was/is being written). Thanks to my friends and editors, Jeanne, Jan, and Stacia for catching little mistakes I otherwise would have let slip onto the pages you will be reading, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself. Thanks to you for reading it and for liking Alex and Samantha enough to want to read a trilogy! And thanks to my webmistress, Midgit, who gives freely of her time and talents to put my words on this site for you to read.

P.S. - For those of you who have already read Sedona Rain - the first four chapters of this book are the former chapters: 16 (the latter half), 17, 18, and 19 of SR (What an easy start for me!). This online version has no introduction to the characters or story and is given without a prologue. I'm going to presume that if you are starting on this story, you already know what's happening, when it is in print there will be a better lead in!

California Gold (tentative title)

Feedback/Comments to WomynBard@aol.com.

Chapter 1

The days turned into weeks, and before the two women knew it the weekend of Halloween was at hand.

True to Alex's prediction, they heard from Sonny on the 20th, reminding them of the party and his excitement at seeing them again, especially on one of his most favorite holidays. He refused to disclose what he had chosen for them to wear when Samantha asked about the costumes, but informed her that she would be pleased with his choice and they would probably win a prize at

the party.

Because Alex didn't want to fight traffic on a Friday afternoon going toward Los Angeles, she booked a flight early on the 29th. She figured with a 2 o'clock departure they should have no trouble getting to the John Wayne airport and getting out of San Francisco's as well.

Sonny would be the one to meet them upon arrival. He threw a hissy fit when Alex mentioned getting a taxi from the airport. After years of dealing with her friend, the brunette knew better than to argue once his mind was made up. Listening to him complain was one of her least favorite pastimes.

The flight was uneventful, and when they walked off the plane and down the corridor after landing in San Francisco, the women were greeted by Sonny, donning a huge feathered masquerade mask and holding a sign that read: Dorian, party of two.

"Gee, did you think those lavender feathers would put us off track as to who was picking us up?" Alex queried.

"Wow, what a beautiful mask," Samantha observed.

Ignoring Alex's sarcasm, Sonny went directly for the compliment, "Why, thank you, sweetness; I wore it for you anyway, not that irritating brunette you travel with." He hugged and kissed Samantha gingerly and then turned a cheek for Alex to give him a kiss, which she dutifully did.

"Come on, you two, let's go get the luggage." Alex nodded her head in the direction of the baggage station, while Sonny and Samantha looked at each other and giggled.

"I'm just so happy to see you girls," Sonny blurted out. "We're going to have such fun tomorrow night!"

"I'm really looking forward to it," Samantha announced. "It's been years since I've been to a masquerade. What are we all going as?"

"No, no, no," Sonny wiggled a finger in Samantha's face. "You're not going to get the surprise out of me that easily. I'm going to let you keep guessing until the final hour . . ."

"Why? So we have no recourse but to wear whatever contraption you've decided to stuff us into?" Alex questioned.

"Alex!" Samantha chided. "Be nice."

"Nice? You've never seen what this freak has worn to the Castro shindig on Halloween in years gone by." The words were harsh, but there was a smile in the tone and an undeniable twinkle in the sapphire eyes of the tall brunette.

"But I never made you wear something you were uncomfortable in," Sonny came to his own

defense.

"No," Alex agreed. "I never did mind dressing in a tux to be your second escort when you decided to be Belle of the ball."

Before Sonny could think of a comeback, and before Samantha had a chance to pose a question, they pulled up next to a beautifully embellished Queen Anne Victorian home, sitting royally on a corner lot.

Samantha's eyes and mouth were agape. "Gods, this is gorgeous, Sonny!" the small blonde complimented her friend. The house itself was a pale yellow with dark green shutters. Gables, a veranda, and the bay windows discretely sported dabs of gold, and royal purple, with a gingerbread trim of lavender and white.

"Thanks, Sammie, she's our 'Painted Lady' alright."

Alex grabbed the suitcase out of the trunk and Sonny took the smaller overnight case. As they approached the house, he continued talking to Samantha. "Some of the more 'uppity' neighbors were a bit upset with our choice of colors when we first moved in. But they soon stopped dishing dirt when a few other houses began following suit, and what had been a rather stuffy, drab neighborhood transformed into a land of rainbow colors." His grin was one of pride as he showed Samantha around the front of his castle. "Hell, if I have the money to buy here, I'm going to decorate my house however I wish."

"Well, I think it's beautiful," Samantha complimented, again. "I can't wait to see the inside."

"Wait until you see the view we'll have from the second floor guestroom, Samantha," Alex added, as she gave her old friend a smile and received one in return.

It was one thing to gloat about your own house and quite another when someone else did the bragging for you. Alex's compliment meant more to Sonny than she could have imagined.

"We can look at the back of the house later," Sonny stated, opening the front door for the women to enter.

The inside was definitely a mixture of 'old meets new.' Although Samantha knew from the size of some of the rooms as Sonny showed her around that the inside had been renovated, it still had much of its 'days gone by' charm. They had kept all the beautiful, deep mahogany wainscoting that graced the dining room from floor to mid-wall. Between the living room and dining room and also between the living room and library there were pocket doors that retracted neatly and totally into the sides of the doublewide doorways separating the rooms.

Windows were abundant in most of the rooms on the first floor, and padded window seats that doubled as storage spaces lined most of the windowed areas.

Samantha marveled at the library, which sported built-in bookcases covering two of the walls

and cabinets with beveled glass doors that surrounded the fireplace. The fireplace was rather ornate with a mantle upon which sat a small grandfather clock.

"Would you look at this," Samantha exclaimed as she sat down on the closest of the bench seats that made up part of the brass club fender surrounding the outside of the fireplace. "You can sit here in the winter and enjoy the fire while you read."

"Or you could just as easily be quite comfortable over here in this overstuffed chair," Alex stated as she plopped down on said piece of furniture.

"We used to have an Oriental rug in here," Sonny told his friend. "But I like this room to be cozy and warm when the weather becomes nasty and cold, so I talked Ray into allowing me to carpet this and the living room. We kept the wood floor in the dining room as you saw, and he has his Oriental in there."

"It's beautiful, Sonny," Samantha sighed. "I love the idea of the new and the old existing comfortably side by side. You seem to have kept all the old grace of the house itself, but your furnishings are more 20th century."

"That's because Ray and I had a lot of compromising to do when it came to furnishing the house," Sonny admitted. "I love the old house, but I also like the convenience of today's amenities, so the kitchen has been remodeled and is totally New Age. I have every kitchen gadget imaginable!" His smile was genuine and quite contagious. "I have a Butler's Pantry that I keep well stocked, and half of it is temperature controlled for wine. Gotta put the grape drink somewhere when you don't have a cellar."

"I hope you set us up for dinner at a decent hour tonight," Alex interjected during the house tour. "We had a rather early breakfast and didn't take the time to have lunch."

"Got it covered," the blond man affirmed. "Rather, Ray does. He figured you'd want to eat before the aristocrats tonight and then just kind of kick around, since tomorrow's going to be so hectic. I figured we show Sammie some of the photos from yesteryear and give her a glimpse of what to expect out of a San Francisco Halloween."

"Oh, you're going to frighten her **before** the party-is that the idea?" Alex grinned and shook her head. "Listen, why don't you continue showing Samantha around, and I'll take these bags up to the room."

"Sounds like a solid idea, Alex. I'll get you out a cold one and put it on the counter for when you come down."

"On second thought, why don't I get that beer first and take it up with me?"

"Suit yourself." Sonny pointed in the direction of the refrigerator. "You know where we keep it." He placed a hand on Samantha's back and maneuvered her toward the rear of the house. "We'll take a look at the yard, and then I'll show you around upstairs."

Because of the hill they were situated on, Ray and Sonny had a superb vista of the Bay, giving them a romantic view at Samantha's favorite time of the day.

"I'll bet the sunsets are spectacular from here," the blonde stated as she took in the landscape. "I love your pool and Jacuzzi! The waterfall and dark bottom transform this yard into a city jungle."

"That was the idea, especially with all the animals that come to play in the water," Sonny joked. "We do like the dark bottom, though, because it tends to keep the water warmer without having to use the heater as much."

"And it gives it that tropical lagoon atmosphere," Samantha added.

"Yeah, that, too. Ready to see the upstairs?"

"Sure!"

The upstairs had been renovated to turn the three medium sized bedrooms into one large bedroom and one master suite. Samantha loved the view from the guestroom, just as Alex had suggested earlier that she would. The panorama of San Francisco's Bay was breathtaking, and beyond the Bay was an exquisite oceanscape.

Ray called just as Sonny was finishing up the tour to check and see that they all made it back to the house in one piece. He hadn't liked the idea of sending Sonny to the airport alone to pick up the girls, but he had a scheduled appointment with a valued client, and his lover had promised not to get agitated in the Friday afternoon traffic. Ray stated that he would be home within the hour and had made reservations for dinner at 7 o'clock at one of Alex's favorite restaurants.

No matter how Samantha tried to skirt around, trying to get Sonny to tell them about their costumes for tomorrow evening, he always avoided the subject or would simply stare at her and smile, shaking his head.

When they got back from dinner, Ray pulled out the cognac, and he and Alex went outside to sit by the pool. The more excitable duo opened a bottle of Merlot and perched on the couch with the masquerade album from years gone by opened wide and straddling their laps. The tittering coming from the two as they sat and looked at fairies, queens, mimes, slave boys, and many, many near-naked men became loud enough to elicit grins on the faces of Alex and Ray as they sat trying to discuss business.

Finally, coming to the end of the visual entertainment, Samantha, again tried to pry out of Sonny what they would be wearing Saturday night for the party.

"Let me ask you this first," Sonny began, "Have you ever watched Hercules on television?"

"Can't say that I have," Samantha confessed.

"Did you tell me that you were told about the spin off show?"

"Yes, but we haven't really had the time to watch it yet. I haven't even played the game I got for my birthday very much. Alex has played it a few times but . . . "

"Well, before we go to bed tonight, you are going to be indoctrinated into the clan. I taped a Herc episode, and Xena followed right after, so I taped that, also. You have nothing better to do, and I think it's about time you and that lover of yours caught up with the television obsession of the decade."

"Really?"

"Really! Go get Alex and Ray while I find the tape . . . wait! Want to make some popcorn first?"

"Always!"

"Come on then." He led her into the kitchen and grabbed a package of microwavable double butter popcorn from the pantry. "Here, put this on for five minutes and . . . "

"Hey, gourmet, I can cook . . . especially popcorn. You go on ahead and find your video."

Five minutes later and under duress, they dragged the two missing partners in from outside, and all four of them were sitting in the living room preparing to watch fictional people fighting mythical creatures.

"Ah, isn't that cute," Alex exclaimed of the relationship of the two male leads. "Is that how you feel following Ray around, Sonny?"

She promptly received a knuckled fist in her upper arm and feigned pain and anguish at the thought that Sonny would think of reacting violently to a mere observation.

"Very funny, Alex. Just wait until the next show comes on, you'll be laughing out of the other side of your mouth."

"Yeah, right!" was the only comeback until she thought to ask just why they were sitting up watching these television icons anyway.

Shoulder shrugs and an impish grin, as well as a deep breath preceded Sonny's answer to the question. "Finish watching the second episode with the female leads, and then I will satisfy everyone's curiosity, okay?"

It was agreed all around that they would sit and enjoy the rest of the shows, finish off both the popcorn and the Merlot, and then attain a satisfactory answer to tonight's charade.

Samantha commented that Alex resembled the female lead in the next series, and Alex retaliated with the fact that Samantha could almost pass as a double for the "half-pint" co-star. Sonny and

Ray both sat with large grins on their faces as they watched their friends watch the number one syndicated show of the year for the very first time.

Alex made a comment during one of the commercials that Sonny hadn't taken the time to remove from the tape, that she had seen the star on a late night talk show a while back, over a year ago. She continued to relate that she sounded absolutely **nothing** like the character she portrayed on the small screen.

"Hello?" Sonny chimed in, "Could that be because she is an 'actress,' and that's what actresses do? She's from New Zealand, and that's why she doesn't really **sound** like her character. They try to give all the cast a California accent . . . we Californians are very popular you know?" He smiled and continued, "Most of the people, especially the extras, are all Kiwis on both the shows, and if you listen really carefully, you can hear certain words that retain the native accent."

"Mostly, they all do a great job," Ray interjected.

The ending credits began flashing across the screen, the evening was getting late, and Alex wanted an answer to her questions. Samantha also wanted the finale to the evening that Sonny had promised.

"Okay, okay, I can see I'm not going to get away with not showing you your costumes before we go to bed." The blond walked out of the room and returned carrying four hangers draped over his shoulder. He walked over to each person in the room and handed them one of the costumes.

Alex was the first to have hers out of the plastic wrapping. "You want me to be a Warrior Princess?" she roared.

"Most definitely," came the response. "You fit her to a tee, Alex. Right down to the ebony hair, the height, and the temper. She's a very formidable character."

"Yeah, and who are you going to be?" Deep blue eyes stared at her friend, but not a trace of a smile showed upon the dark-haired beauty's face.

"Come on, Alex, be a sport," Samantha pleaded. "Actually, you look very much like the actress, and you most certainly have the physique and demeanor to carry the character off."

"And who are you going as?" Alex turned her stare to her lover.

"Looks like I'm going as the blonde who shows more of her body than I have ever shown at one time, barring the wearing of a swimsuit." Samantha held up the two-piece leather outfit and then reached down into the plastic bag that accompanied it to reveal two sharp objects that were definitely supposed to be weapons. "Hey, I remember seeing some of these in one of the martial arts books we have at the Center. They're called sais, right? That blonde actress looked like she really knew how to use these."

"Yeah, well, that's her job, like Sonny said." Alex reached into the bag she was holding and

pulled out a sword, sheath, and round thing that looked like a Frisbee with the center cut out. "Ah ha, the weapons of choice of the brunette?"

"Most definitely," Sonny acknowledged. He smiled as he nodded to Ray, prompting him to open the plastic bag containing his costume. "You see, we're all going as old friends. Ray will be Hercules, and I will be his sidekick. Alex will go as the fictional Xena, and Sammie here will be Gabrielle. I think it'll be a hoot!"

Even Alex had to admit that the idea was novel, and the four of them might very well come off with a prize during the contest.

"Now that the big secret has been revealed, what does everyone say to getting a decent night's sleep before we have to contend with the excitement of tomorrow evening?" Ray looked at his guests and then at his lover.

"I'm in total agreement." Alex seconded the motion for retirement.

Since no one objected, the television was turned off, the dishes put into the kitchen sink, and the four friends retired to their respective bedrooms.

With the lights out, the women lay side-by-side in bed, looking out at the stars glimmering in the early morning sky. The feeling of peace that always came over them when they were locked in each other's arms seemed to find no strange landscape in which to perpetuate itself.

"I don't think your being a warrior is a stretch of anyone's imagination," Samantha murmured without lifting her head from her lover's chest. "You've been my warrior and champion, almost since the day I met you."

"Hey!" Alex countered, squeezing the smaller woman, jovially. "I thought I was your 'Princess Charming.'"

"That, too," Samantha agreed. This time she lifted her head and repositioned her body just enough to receive a warm goodnight kiss. "You are all those women rolled into one. What a lucky bard I am."

"Ah, getting into the mood already are we? Just remember, that little blonde seems as feisty with her weapons as she is with her quill and parchment." She kissed the golden hair on her lover's crown. "Sweet dreams, my bard **and** my Destiny."

"Same to you, my love."

To the surprise and elation of all, the next day dawned bright and balmy, with unseasonably warm weather. Even though Halloween was not until Sunday, the Castro area decided that Saturday was by far the best day and night to celebrate. Sonny insisted that they start the day out

at a restaurant in that very area, as the festivities had begun the evening before.

Since the weather was willing, they decided to eat at an establishment that had sidewalk seating, and that way they could observe the party atmosphere. Their waiter was a young man who was painted from head to toe in metallic gold. When he wasn't busy running from table to table taking or delivering orders, he would stop and pose for anyone who wanted to take a picture. Since the extent of his costume, other than the paint, was nothing more than a thong, he was extremely busy posing.

The morning and afternoon disappeared quickly in anticipation of the evening's activities, and before anyone knew it, it was time to don the costumes and become fictionalized characters.

"At least we won't freeze in these costumes with the weather being as warm as it is," Alex observed as she picked up the leather outfit and cringed at the thought of traipsing around in public in it. "The things I do for love," she voiced, loud enough for Samantha to hear.

"'Methinks thou doth protest too much,'" Samantha answered with a smile. "You know you're going to have a fabulous time; why don't you just admit it?"

"I would have a 'fabulous time' simply watching all the 'freaks' running around in costumes. I don't have to **become** one of them." The reply was antisocial, but there was laughter in the tone.

When the two women finished dressing they stood looking into the faces of women from a different time, a different place.

"Gods, Alex, if I had known you'd look **this** good as a 'real warrior,' I would have purchased a costume for you months ago," Samantha kidded her mate.

"Oh, you would have, would you?" Alex kidded back. "And you think a simple request would have been sufficient to get me into an outfit such as this?"

"Maybe not a 'simple request,' perhaps a bribe . . . "

"Ah, a bribe . . . that most definitely might have done it!" Alex agreed. "But you're not the only one who's impressed with the barbarian look." She narrowed the distance between them and put her arms around Samantha's neck.

"You look extremely provocative," Alex whispered into her lover's ear. "You're quite attractive with your navel showing." With a crooked grin and raised eyebrow she continued, "But I'm not entirely sure I want to see you marching around the Castro half-naked."

"That's why you have the warrior costume," Samantha joked. "It's to keep people from taking advantage of the little innocent walking beside you."

"Hey, she didn't look like such an innocent to me."

"I'm getting there," Samantha pouted. "You can't expect me to turn into a full-blown sidekick in just a few short lessons when you've had practically a lifetime of experience."

"Yeah, well you're catching on pretty quickly," the taller woman confessed as she took the smaller into her arms. "Are you ready to go join the two heroes downstairs?"

Looking up into blue velvet eyes, Samantha smiled and nodded her head. For an instant she was taken back to that fateful night on the beach when she first laid eyes on Alex. It seemed like a lifetime ago, and the person standing in front of her no longer carried the look of melancholy on her beautiful face.

"What do you see when you stare at me so intensely?" Alex questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"With that long, black wig on, it reminds me of the first time I saw you." She leaned into Alex's chest and hugged her tightly. "I hope I never see that lost expression on your face again."

A strong hand lifted the smaller woman's chin and their eyes locked again. "As long as you're by my side, I'll never have cause to retrieve that look." She bent down slightly and kissed the already parted lips of her lover. Passions stirred and were immediately squelched by a sharp rap on the bedroom door.

"I think we've waited long enough," Sonny's tenor rang through the wooden door. "Come on, girls, you must be ready by now. If you take any longer Ray's gonna cop out on me and change back into his dull old self."

Opening the door, Alex found herself stifling a laugh as she looked at her friend sporting a full blond wig. "That look ought to take you back a few years," she chortled, patting Sonny on the head.

"Don't get smart, Alex," Sonny warned. "I could mention some things about you that have changed over the years as well." He started to say more, but his eyes wandered beyond the brunette to take in the blonde beauty standing behind her. "I'll be damned if you don't look like you could be her twin." Grabbing Samantha's hand he slowly had her turn so he could take in the entire costume. "I don't know which of you looks more like the real McCoy. I did a really good job in picking out this year's costumes."

"Would you like an arm extension, or are you doing just fine in the back patting department?" Alex asked.

"Seriously," Sonny turned back to Alex. "You have to admit you both look like the television characters."

"I know Alex does," Samantha chimed in. "You're a pretty good imitation of Herc's sidekick yourself, Sonny."

"Yeah, well wait until you see Ray all decked out in his super hero's outfit. Please don't laugh at

him, Alex. One crooked smile from you and my escort will be donning his jeans and tee-shirt, and my Halloween will be ruined." He looked so pitiful standing there pleading that Alex couldn't help but smile.

"I wouldn't think of ruining the most important night of your year, and I must admit that if I have to dress up for this silly occasion, this is definitely the warrior to be this year."

Sonny thanked Alex and then led the way back downstairs where Ray was sitting drinking a beer.

"Don't you think you should have put that in a mug or something?" Alex asked. "I don't think they had aluminum cans back in the times of the Greek gods."

"Wow!" Ray almost choked on his drink when he saw Alex and Samantha in the costumes. "I knew you two would look terrific in those outfits, but this is phenomenal. You could be stand-ins for the actresses."

"Thank you very much, I'm quite happy with my station in life," Alex asserted.

"But it would be fun to be on the set while they are filming something like that," Samantha spoke up as she entered the room. "Hey, you look really buff in that outfit. Looks like I'm the only one who doesn't have to wear a wig."

"That's only because they cut Gabrielle's hair at the end of last season," Sonny told her.

"You really are hooked on this show!" Samantha stated.

"It's something to watch on Saturday afternoon, and it comes on after Hercules. Besides it's the theme of tonight's masquerade-television and movie personalities."

"Okay, let's stop the idle chatter and get this group moving," Ray interjected. "If we don't leave soon, we'll never find a decent place to watch the parade."

"Watch? I thought we were going to march this year," Sonny whined.

"Don't press your luck, side-kick boy," Alex warned.

"Ditto," Ray agreed. "Besides," he looked out the window, "here's the cab; I decided I didn't want to play *try to park the car* tonight."

Samantha smiled and shook her head as she hugged her friend in sympathy. "Come on, let's go see if anyone can top your inspiration."

There was already a crowd when they stepped out of the yellow cab and onto the sidewalk.

Unbeknownst to Sonny, Ray had made reservations at one of the few restaurants in town that specialized in second story veranda dining. It was a unique atmosphere, a patio far above the street that was closed in during the cold winter months but left open to the air during this time of year. He had reserved a railing table, so they could watch the parade without being elbowed by the multitude below. There would be no stretching to see over people's heads tonight, at least not during the parade.

An elaborate dinner came with the reservation, and the menu was offered to the seated guests, sans the price of a hundred dollars a plate.

"You have a choice of soup or salad, any entrée, veggie of the day, and dessert. Everything is included so, bon appetite." Ray beamed as he saw the looks on Sonny and Samantha's faces. Alex gave him a knowing smile and nodded her head in approval.

"Nice spot," she acknowledged, knowing full well that the idea to dine outdoors was Ray's, but the choice of establishments had been hers. This was his night to shine and there was no way she was going to burst his bubble by letting Samantha know that she was the one who had suggested this particular restaurant.

"Yes," Ray agreed. "This place came highly recommended." He smiled at Alex, knowing that she was too much of a good friend to mention that she had anything to do with tonight's choice.

Dinner was superb, and watching Samantha and Sonny was almost as much fun as watching the parade. The two giggled and pointed throughout dinner and were oblivious to the stares they were getting from customers in the restaurant as people recognized the foursome as characters from a popular television series. Alex heard arguments as the buzz went around the patio that perhaps she and Samantha were really the actresses who played the warrior and her bard. Positive hopes were dashed when others in the various groups pointed out that their male counterparts were definitely not the real-life actors, and they chided their friends for presuming that the stars would be seen in public in their costumes. The brunette made a mental note to tell her lover all about the conversations when she got her alone, but for right now she was content to sit and watch as Sonny and Samantha enjoyed themselves on this special evening. Occasionally, the two blondes would try to engage Alex and Ray in their excitement, but the moment would pass and they would once again immerse themselves in the celebration flowing by them on the street below.

Dinner and the parade ended almost simultaneously. Next on the agenda was a private masquerade at the home of one of their clients from the gym. It was over on the other side of town, so Ray called for a cab while the rest of his party ordered after dinner drinks.

Samantha couldn't believe the neighborhood they drove through to get to the party, and when they pulled into the gated driveway she turned to Sonny with a questioning look.

"Did I forget to tell you that these people are close to being as filthy rich as your lover?" He grinned at his friend. "Not too close, but they sure know how to throw one helluva a masquerade ball." He reached behind him and pulled out the canvas bag he had been carrying around all

evening. It contained four half-masks, two with feathers and peacock plumes and two more plain for the less flamboyant members of the group. "What's a masked ball without the masks?"

"Oh, Sonny," Samantha exclaimed. "These are beautiful! I'm not sure it goes with my outfit," she giggled.

"Sure it does, lavender goes with everything!"

He handed Alex and Ray their face coverings and received a shaking head from each of them.

"Do we really have to put these on?" Alex queried. "No one knows who we are, and we're already dressed for the party."

"Some of these people might recognize you from years past, Alex," Sonny countered. "Besides, Ray and I do know quite a few of the guests and the hosts. Masks on until the stroke of midnight." With a flick of his wrist he instructed everyone to cover their faces before they entered the house.

Sonny looked to Ray to present the invitations to the butler at the door, and the four friends entered the elegantly decorated home.

The foursome received the anticipated stares as they slowly made their way through the crowd to the banquet table and bar on the other side of the room. Sonny smiled and nudged Samantha each time he heard a comment about how much they looked like the stars of the television show. Of course, Sonny was not a fool. He realized that most of the comments were focused on the girls, but since it was he who had picked out the costumes, he still took pride in the statements.

"Do you really think we have a chance at winning the competition?" Samantha asked as her gaze covered the rest of the room. "The expense some of these people went to for their costumes is obvious." She pointed to the couple standing in one of the corners, "Look at Antony and Cleopatra; those jewels around her neck look real."

"They probably are, Sweetie, and she's a he."

"No!"

"Yes," Sonny answered with a nod and a knowing smile. "They're your hosts. Isn't Cleo beautiful?"

"Gorgeous! Could have fooled me," Samantha confessed.

"Sounds like *he did*," Alex interjected as she handed her lover a glass of champagne. "But, you'll be seeing a lot of mixing and matching tonight. After all, it is All Hallows Eve, and the queens are out in force!"

They mingled among pirates, slaves, queens, kings, aliens, and a multitude of celebrity look

alikes. Alex heard her character's war cry more than once throughout the evening as she walked among the costumed guests.

"Seems like these two characters are extremely popular," Alex mumbled into Samantha's ear after they had excused themselves from a conversation that centered on the warrior and the bard.

"Sonny sure knew what he was doing when he picked these costumes," Samantha concluded.

Samantha somehow managed to get Alex to dance to a few slow songs, and Sonny became her escort when the faster tempos came over the speakers.

Alex did meet up with a few old acquaintances. She managed to introduce them to Samantha between dances.

As the midnight hour approached, there was the quiver of electricity in the air.

Finally, the magic moment arrived. The music was hushed and all masks turned toward the podium where a beautiful Cleopatra, aka Terry, one of the evening's hosts, stood ready to make the announcement the crowd had been waiting for.

"I must confess that the judges had a very difficult time this year choosing just three winners. Before I announce the lucky couples, it's time to take off your masks and let the world see who you really are." A drum roll followed as masks were dropped and faces revealed. Exclamations of surprise filled the room; friends who thought they would know each other anywhere were surprised at the faces under the masks.

"Okay, with no further ado, let's get to the prizes. I'll start by acknowledging the third place trophy, which goes to Seven of Nine and her companion Captain Janeway. Along with their trophy, they also receive brunch for four at Angel's Hook on Fisherman's Wharf."

The couple stepped up and stood beside Cleo after receiving their prize.

"Second place was a tie between Hercules and Iolaus and Beauty and the Beast. We weren't expecting the judges to be so fixed on giving double awards, so a second trophy and certificate for dinner for four at the Four Seasons will be mailed to the second winning couple. Sonny and Ray come on up here; Klancy and JayJay stop trying to hide in the corner. You must stand beside me to receive your prize." Terry motioned the four winners forward, and they were all encouraged with a round of applause.

"And finally, first place. It seems like the television personalities are walking away with all the prizes this year. Exactly what kind of social life do you people have?"

A murmur of laughter from the crowd prompted the speaker to continue. "The judges told me that this was the easiest of decisions. These two women had heads turning all evening. Congratulations to the Warrior Princess and her bard! I know we have more than one couple dressed like the Grecian duo, but the winners happen to be standing . . ." He pointed to Alex and

Samantha and motioned them toward him. "Come on, ladies, don't be shy, you're among friends." The host smiled, "Alex, I never expected to see you in such a revealing costume. Nice surprise and welcome back!" Terry turned to the crowd and announced that, as well as receiving a trophy, the first place couple would be his and Jason's guests at the opening of Victor, Victoria when it came back into town in January. "Nothing like a good reason to return to the City by the Bay, right, Alex and . . ."

"Samantha," Alex reminded their host.

"That's right, Samantha," he beamed at his new acquaintance.

After congratulating all the contestants and the winners, Terry graciously thanked everyone for making the party a success for another year. He insisted that they keep on enjoying themselves, but after the unmasking and giving of prizes, the room visibly thinned.

"So, do we stay a little longer or get home at a decent hour?" Alex asked the rest of her entourage.

"I think we should mingle for a little while. After all, we did take first and second place. It would only be good manners to not take the gifts and run." Sonny had a point, and Samantha nodded affirmatively, stating that she agreed with Sonny.

"I'll go along with that consensus," Ray contributed.

Alex knew she was out voted. "Okay, another drink, a dance or two, and then home, agreed?"

"Agreed," the other three answered simultaneously.

The early morning hours sped by and it was after two when Alex finally got Samantha alone enough to talk her into leaving. "Okay, Miss Belle of the Ball, are you about ready to turn in your dance card? I'm exhausted, and this costume is not the most comfortable . . ."

"I'm sorry, Alex," Samantha crooned. "I was having such a good time, I . . ."

"It's okay, you were supposed to have a good time. It's just that it's late and we have a full day tomorrow before we have to leave. Besides, look at Ray there in the corner. He's been nodding off for nearly an hour now."

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" the blonde questioned.

"For the simple fact that you **were** having such a good time," Alex confessed.

"Let me go get Sonny and meet you over by Ray."

"Good idea. You sure you don't want me to go along?"

"No, Alex, if you come with me, Sonny will think that you are just trying to stop him from having fun. He'll listen to me a lot easier."

"Yeah, I've noticed," the taller woman chuckled. "I'll call a cab," she informed her lover, then walked away from her and toward their sleeping friend.

Samantha had no trouble prying Sonny from the clutches of an overbearing queen, dressed as a lady of the evening, and soon the four friends were on their way home.

Sleep came quickly, practically as soon as their heads hit the pillows.

Sonny dreamed of winning first place next year at the costume ball, while Ray dreamed of not having to go at all.

Alex, unexpectedly, continued the masquerade into her dreams, as she protected her bard from the dangers of living in a barbaric world. Samantha smiled in her sleep, while visions of her warrior, dressed in leather and protecting her from a world of warlords, set her mind to imagining.

When the four friends awoke in the morning, Halloween had been banished to the realm of memories, and the world was back to normal, or as normal as it ever could be in San Francisco.

Sleep had made use of the early morning hours and before they knew it afternoon had arrived, and the hour for departure closed in on the little group. Although Samantha and Sonny tried to keep the clock from ticking, they were unsuccessful. A late lunch on the way to the airport was the final meal for the friends during this particular long weekend.

Standing at the departure door, tears flowed freely from the eyes of the Samantha and Sonny as they said their farewells. Even though they knew they would be spending time together again within the next few months, it was difficult to leave without emotion. The realization that they would be seeing a lot more of each other from now on came to Alex and Ray concurrently, as they watched the mournful scene their partners were putting on for observing passengers.

"Change of environment for a weekend is always a plus," Alex said, patting her old friend on the shoulder. "I do believe we will be doing this on a fairly regular basis, so you had best find some business reasons to meet with me or get stock in the airlines."

"Yes, I'm afraid our status as workaholics will definitely be destroyed by this relationship between our better halves." Ray grinned at his friend.

With a switch of partners, Samantha bid Ray adieu and Sonny did the same to Alex. The two women then boarded the plane and headed back to their quieter life on the edge of the ocean in Laguna.

"Last stop for the evening . . . the garage," Alex announced as she maneuvered the Boxster next to the VW. "As much as I enjoy cavorting around the big city with Sonny and Ray, I'm always happy to arrive safely home."

"Ditto," Samantha agreed, opening the car door and getting out. "Do we have to bring the luggage up tonight?"

"It's only the one large suitcase and the carryon, I can manage . . ."

"No, no. I'll help." Samantha reached for the smaller bag and then followed Alex into the building. "I just don't feel like unpacking tonight."

"You don't have to. I simply like to get the stuff all up into the house when I first get home, that way it's not hanging over me in the morning."

"I don't know why I feel so tired," Samantha whined.

"Couldn't be that we didn't get much sleep the entire weekend, and then you had to cry before leaving the airport, now could it?" The brunette put her arm around the smaller woman's shoulder as they walked to the elevator. "That really was a cute outfit on you, Samantha. Might make for some interesting play."

"Alex!" Samantha squealed. "Such thoughts!"

"I didn't say how we would play," Alex smiled at the blonde. "Why, Samantha, I do believe you're blushing." She tilted her lover's face toward her own and gently placed a kiss on crimson cheeks.

"Yeah, well, I can only imagine. I'll bet you have me beat by a long shot when it comes to kinky stuff."

The only answer the blonde received was a sigh, a shake of ebony locks, a raised eyebrow, and a crooked smile.

Changing the subject, Alex opened the door to the apartment. "Your castle awaits, my love." The sweet smell of vanilla still permeated the front rooms, welcoming them home, along with a long m-e-o-w as Rainbow ran to her people and stretched her body up Samantha's leg, begging to be held.

"Aren't you the best welcome wagon in town?" the blonde cooed, picking the small animal up and cuddling her. "That little engine of yours certainly is a purring machine, Rainbow." She nuzzled her face into the cat's, giving the small creature the affection she had missed while they were away.

"I can't imagine who called," Alex announced pushing the play button on the answering machine. "I thought we informed everyone we knew that we'd be out of town for the weekend."

"Maybe telemarketers," Samantha conjectured, as she walked into the pantry to get Rainbow a treat.

The voice coming from the machine stopped the blonde dead in her tracks.

"Hi Sammie; it's Shawn. I know it's been ages and you probably thought I'd fallen off the face of the Earth, but I talked to your dad a few months ago and he told me you had moved to Laguna. I'm going to be there on business next week and was wondering if we might be able to have dinner together? I'll assume you're gone for the evening and will give you a call on Monday. It would really be great to be able to see you again."

The machine clicked off, and Alex stood staring at her lover who was standing in the middle of the kitchen with her mouth hanging open. "And Shawn is **who**?"

"Just some guy I dated for a little while a few years back," came the quiet answer. "Do you think he's going to call back?"

"I'd bet my life on it." The reply had a twinge of sarcasm scattered around the edges.

"He's no threat, Alex."

"I should hope not," the brunette replied, but her tone of voice had a hint of uncertainty.

"Truly, Alex," Samantha insisted. "His father was some big shot in one of the businesses my father was wining and dining. Daddy insisted we meet and date and so we did, but just a few times." She didn't like the intense look on her lover's face. "Honestly, Alex, you're getting upset over a voice on the telephone. All he wants to do is have dinner. The three of us can go together . . ."

"No!" The answer was emphatic. "If you want to have dinner with him, that's fine. We don't need to make it a threesome."

"Don't be ridiculous, honey, of course we'll make it a threesome."

"No. I'll just feel out of place." Her tone of voice softened as she realized how she must sound. "Really, Samantha, you go ahead and meet up with this friend of yours. I'm sure I can entertain myself for one evening." She tried her damndest to swallow the lump that had suddenly developed in her throat. *Is this how you're going to react every time one of her old acquaintances shows up? You need to give her the respect and trust she's given you.* "I think the call just took me by surprise. You go and have a good time." *Thank the Goddess my words sound more sincere than I feel.* Stepping in front of Samantha, Alex placed both arms around the smaller woman's shoulders. "I love you, Samantha, and I trust you. Come on, it's been a long day. What do you say we call it an early night?"

Standing on her tiptoes, Samantha kissed the love of her life. "I love you, too, Alex, more than you'll ever know. Turning in early sounds great. Let me get Rainbow her treat; she's being extremely patient with me."

"I'll meet you in the bedroom. Don't be long."

"I won't," Samantha promised.

When Alex reached the bedroom door she heard Samantha mumble something under her breath, and the ebony-haired beauty smiled. Shaking her head from side-to-side, she mentally answered the unasked question from the other room. *Of course we don't have to go directly to sleep!*

The End of Chapter 1

Chapter 2.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ California Gold ~

by Carole Giorgio

All disclaimers may be found in Chapter 1

Feedback/Comments to WomynBard@aol.com.

Chapter 2

Good intentions set aside, neither of the women had realized just how much the excitement of the weekend had drained them. Alex was showering when Samantha entered the bedroom; she had every intention of joining her mate but made the mistake of pulling down the covers first. The soft, warm bed was definitely enticing, and when Alex came out of the bathroom she found a very soundly sleeping Goldie Locks who was totally naked from the looks of the clothes on the floor but covered to her chin by the sheet and blanket. Curled up at the small woman's feet was a black fur ball, who was glad to have her people home.

Alex had secured the locks before leaving the kitchen area, but she rechecked to make sure Samantha hadn't left any lights on. Then, as quietly as possible, she crawled in next to the sleeper, doing her best not to awaken her.

"I had the most marvelous time this weekend, sweetheart, thank you," Samantha mumbled as she re-adjusted herself to snuggle close to Alex.

"I thought you were sleeping."

"I was, but you feel so soft and smell so sweet, how could I not notice, even through my dreams?"

Alex's arm drew Samantha even closer and she kissed her tenderly on the crown. "Back to dreamland, Sleepyhead, see you in the morning."

"Good night, Alex, sweet dreams."

Normal Mondays were chaotic enough, but those after a long weekend meant there was catch-up work to be done as well as normal routine. Alex let Samantha sleep in while she went down to the clinic area to pick up notes left by supervisors and the agency therapist. From the looks of things, it had been a fairly quiet and smooth-running weekend. There were not any emergency complications, and within the half-hour, she was ready to check her e-mail in hopes of finding a similar situation. A message from Sedona reminded her that she hadn't taken the time to answer Gary's e-mail last week. She smiled at her friend's tongue-in-cheek scolding and promptly filled him in on everything that had been happening since her last correspondence. A message from Aurora reminded her that Thanksgiving was less than a month away. She made a note to discuss with Samantha inviting Sally down for the holiday, hoping she wouldn't feel guilty leaving her mother alone with her father on the special occasion. A few more messages from clients and she was finished with the catch-up work and ready to start the morning. There was still time for a decent breakfast with Samantha if she woke her up soon, so she hit the send button on her last mail and headed up to the penthouse.

Upon exiting the elevator, she could smell that she wouldn't be fighting with Samantha this morning to get her out of bed. "Ah! Just the odors I like to come home to." Placing her arms around the smaller woman's waist she nibbled on her lover's neck. "Good morning, Princess, did you sleep well?"

"Most definitely, thank you very much and a good morning to you, too." Samantha removed the skillet from the fire and turned to receive a morning kiss. "How long have you been up?"

"Oh, just a little over an hour. I thought I'd find you still sleeping soundly, and I would have to resort to a watery awakening." Sapphire eyes glistened with joviality as the taller woman looked into her sweetheart's face.

Samantha shook her head and laughed, "Guess I foiled that bit of morning fun. Will having breakfast be a close second in the satisfaction department?"

"Most definitely," Alex replied, reaching around Samantha and grabbing a breakfast strip.

She got her fingers slapped, but not before she stuffed the entire strip into her mouth.

"Guess you get one less piece when we sit down," Samantha threatened.

"Nope," Alex countered, "that was yours."

Alex filled Samantha in on everything that had happened in their absence and reminded her to call Sally today and ask if she wanted to come visit during the Thanksgiving holiday. "If we ask her soon enough she might be able to come for a long four-day weekend. She could either fly into San Diego on Wednesday night or into John Wayne early on Wednesday and then ride down to La Jolla with us. I'm going to call Mom later tonight; she wrote me an e-mail over the weekend reminding us that the 25th is getting close."

"Listen, Alex, I know Shawn's going to call today. I've been thinking about meeting with him this morning, and if you have any problem with me going to dinner with him, I can make up some excuse and . . ."

"No!" The reply was emphatic even though there were mixed emotions in her heart. "That would be silly, Samantha. He's just an old friend, right?"

"Right."

"Did you sleep with him, Samantha?"

"Of course not! I told you we only went out a few times."

"Ohhh. Yes, you did," the brunette grinned. "I forgot, you don't make love on the very first date, right?" Now she was beaming from ear-to-ear, as she watched the small blonde begin to blush.

"What happened between us was a first, and you know it Alexis Dorian."

"Uh, huh ~ bet you tell that to all the girls."

Samantha swung the dishtowel she had been carrying over her shoulder and hit Alex on the inside of the thigh.

"Ouch!" Alex grabbed her leg, feigning great pain.

"Just go sit down and stop overacting. Breakfast is ready."

Monday morning drifted into afternoon and just as quickly evening cast its shadow on the day. Alex was walking around after the cleaning crew, checking doors and windows and securing the area before calling it a day and going up to the apartment.

Samantha's voice was soft but laced with arsenic and a touch of sadness. Alex quietly closed the door so as not to disturb what sounded like a weighty conversation. The blonde acknowledged

her lover's presence with a nod of her head and a quick smile that immediately disappeared back into a frown.

After getting them each a glass of wine, Alex put Samantha's on the table beside the phone, then went to stand in front of the windows to look out upon the moonlight drenched ocean. It was a cool evening and the breeze was blowing the whitecaps into disarray. Starlight sparkled down on the frothing liquid, and the brunette shivered at the thought of stepping into the cool water. Looking into the glass, she could see her lover's reflection, and her heart skipped a beat when she realized that Samantha was crying. She turned with a questioning look upon her face, just as Samantha replaced the phone in its cradle.

Samantha looked away to hide her tears, but Alex was in front of her on her knees. She placed one hand on either side of the pale face and caught a falling tear with her thumb as it trickled down. "What's the matter, honey?"

"Everything's falling apart at home."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a long story, Alex. I've been on the phone with Sally for over an hour. Dad's becoming impossible to live with, and Mom is beside herself. Sally says he's on the road for a week at a time and that's fine with Mom because when he gets back he's terrible. He's started drinking heavily and when he does he becomes nasty. Sally said the last time she went to visit, Mom had a bruise on her arm and it was like pulling teeth to get her to talk about how she received it."

"Did Don hit her?"

Samantha hung her head and mumbled in the affirmative, tears beginning to stream down her face.

"Honey, don't," Alex begged. "Can we do anything to help?"

"I don't know," the smaller woman sobbed, allowing Alex to draw her close and burying her head in the strong shoulder that was provided for comfort and support. "It's just that we're so far away . . ."

"Do you need to go home to see your mom?"

"No!" Panic replaced the tears as she lifted her head and stared into confused blue eyes. "I can't go home, Alex, that would only make things worse."

"I guess you're right; I wasn't thinking. Is your mother fed up enough to leave, Samantha?"

"I think she's really close to that point, but she's just as afraid to leave him as to stay with him. You don't understand, Alex; he's been her total support for almost 30 years. She hasn't worked in that amount of time and she has no workable skills."

"Come on, honey, of course she has some skills. She may have been out of the loop for a long time, but she's your mom, she can learn. Besides at your father would probably have to pay alimony simply **because** she hasn't worked in so long. And she will get part of the money from the house."

"Yeah, I guess my thinking's a little muddled tonight."

Alex got off her knees and sat beside Samantha on the couch. "Listen, Samantha, if your mother wants to make the break, we've already talked a little about her starting a small boutique in this area."

"I couldn't let you do that, Alex," Samantha started to object.

"And why not?" the brunette sounded hurt. "If she's important to you, she's important to me. Besides, it would be a good business venture. This area could use a good metaphysical store, one with crystals, incense, books, you know, all the stuff you're getting into. Do you think your mom would like to operate something like that?"

Green eyes twinkled as the tears that had been filling them dried, and a smile brightened not only Samantha's face but Alex's heart as well. "You truly are my champion, Alex, always there to pick me up and make everything right. Sally led me to believe that the only reason Mom was not out of the house yet was because she didn't know how to start to leave."

"That's what I have lawyers for, my Darling. Never fear; we can get on top of this, and I can promise you that your mother will come out the victor. The only problem would be if she didn't want to leave the house. I'm sure the attorneys will advise her that selling the property is the only way to achieve a quick settlement and divorce."

"For now, let's just keep this between you and me and maybe I can get both Sally and Mom to come down for Thanksgiving. We kind of got off the subject tonight, but I'll call Sally again tomorrow and pose the question."

"In the meantime, I'll talk to a few of my lawyers and get their advice. So . . . what do you say to finishing our wine and retiring? You've had quite a busy evening."

"You don't have to ask me twice," Samantha smiled as she gently clinked her glass on Alex's. "Crying always makes me so tired."

They started going through the bedtime ritual, and Samantha remembered that she had received another call earlier in the evening. "By the way, honey, Shawn called again tonight. Thank goodness he called before I talked to Sally. Anyway he'll be here next week, and I accepted his invitation for dinner on Wednesday evening. He's only going to be in town the one night so complications should be minimal. Besides, if he asks me any personal questions, he will simply have to deal with the answers."

"Only if you're comfortable giving them," Alex insisted.

"Hey, the only people I was feeling awkward about were my parents, and that's ancient history." She hopped into bed next to Alex and curled up into her usual position.

"Guess this is another evening of just going to sleep?" Alex asked as she caressed the smaller woman's upper arm.

"Alex, I feel kind of . . ."

"I know, and I understand. I'm merely beginning to feel like an old married couple."

"And is that bad?"

"Well, in some respects it could be."

"What if I promise to make it up to you."

"You, my Destiny, have yourself a deal." She kissed the flaxen crown and squeezed her lover tightly. "I love you, Samantha, sweet dreams."

"Sweet dreams, Alex, and I love you, too."

Tuesday provided a few surprises when one of the lecturers suddenly cancelled. Samantha was racing with the clock to get a replacement speaker to discuss a similar, if not the same, topic. As dilemmas tend to do, working against time made the day speed by even quicker than usual. Before the duo realized it, another day was at an end.

The middle of the week arrived as Wednesday morning dawned bright and sunny. The day started out uneventful, and the tone seemed to remain constant throughout the day. Samantha had scheduled a late dinner engagement with Shawn after his business meeting, so she wouldn't be picked up until 8:00 o'clock. Alex had decided to work through until closing. As ridiculous as it sounded, she knew going up to an empty apartment would drive her nuts. She needed to keep herself busy while Samantha was out and could think of nothing better than to bury herself in work.

Before retiring upstairs to change for the evening, Samantha had informed the receptionist that a male friend would be inquiring about her and asked if she would please call the penthouse and let her know when he arrived. Now, the receptionist was receiving conflicting instructions from Alex to contact her first when the man arrived. "I'll make sure he gets to Samantha, you just make sure he comes to me first," were her exact words. Not wanting to anger either of the bosses, she figured her best bet was to follow the latter instructions and personally escorted Shawn to Alex's office when he arrived. She knocked on the executive's door and waited for an invitation to enter.

When he walked into the room Alex got a nauseous feeling of déjà vu. This man looked like a younger version of someone whose likeness did not bring forth pleasant memories.

"Ms. Dorian," the receptionist began, "this is Mr. . . ."

"Shawn McDouglas," the young man held out his hand as he walked toward the massive desk and the tall executive rising to meet him.

Goddess, help me, Alex inaudibly murmured as she got up to meet him half way. *I know his weasel of a father.* She put on her best smile and shook the hand that was now in front of her. "Alexis Dorian, Mr. McDouglas, it's a pleasure to meet you."

His hand was damp and his grip was weak, not at all a healthy first impression. Alex smiled, concealing the fact that she remembered telling one of her top salespeople to drop this man's father's company like a hot potato. The senior McDouglas was an underhanded sleaze and not worth the effort of courting to get his pathetic business.

With the smile now pasted on her face, she continued, "Samantha is upstairs getting dressed. I thought perhaps you might like a drink while waiting for her to finish?"

"Sure." He swallowed hard. "That would be great. I can't wait to see Sammie again. But, you know, I wouldn't mind getting a look around this Center of yours either, Ms. Dorian; it's very impressive."

"Excellent, Shawn," Alex smiled, not bothering to tell him to call her Alex. "If you don't mind, I'll have one of my assistants show you around, while I go up and let Samantha know that you're here."

"Great."

He does have an elaborate vocabulary, now doesn't he? Alex sighed to herself. *And I was worried about him and Samantha?* "So, what's your pleasure, Shawn?"

"Ah, whatever you're having will be fine."

"Well, I'm not going to have anything right now. I'm not totally stocked, but there's Goldschlager, Goldenbarr, Chivas Regal Century, Tanqueray Citrus, Southern Comfort, and Tuaca. Do any of those strike your fancy?"

Looking a little dazzled, he took a second or two before answering. "The Tanqueray Citrus on the rocks, please."

"Coming right up." Alex opened the cabinet sitting behind her desk and took out a tall bottle of flavored vodka. She poured and handed him the drink and then escorted him out of the office and toward the gym in search of Angel. She knew the assistant didn't have another patient for an hour

and after a short introduction, asked if she would be so kind as to show Shawn around the Center. Excusing herself, she headed toward the elevator and up to the penthouse.

Cautioning herself to not sound egotistical, she opened the door and called for Samantha. "Oh, Sammie, your dinner date has arrived."

Samantha shook her head and sighed; this was going to be a big mistake. She cursed herself for not telling Shawn she couldn't see him. "Come on, Alex, give me a break. I know he's not the sharpest tool in the shed, but he's not the dullest, either. Why the flippant remark?" She rounded the corner from the bedroom to the living area and stopped her lover dead in her tracks.

"You look way too lovely to be going out with that throwback to the seventies, Samantha. Wow!"

The blonde smiled as she did a little twirl in front of her lover. "Do you really like it? It's something I pulled out of one of my boxes this afternoon."

Alex stared at the hunter green, velvet pants suit that adorned her lover's body. The bodice was V-shaped, and she had chosen to wear her Chinese good luck earrings and the matching necklace with the unicorn.

Samantha noticed Alex staring at the jewelry and commented, "I thought if I wore this, I'd be taking a little of you with me tonight, and I wouldn't feel so alone." She smiled and continued, "Besides it's suppose to ward off evil beasts or at least calm the savage ones."

Still not receiving a smile from her lover she walked closer and put her arms around Alex's waist. "You know, I can still call off the dinner. It's not that important to me."

Alex kissed her lover's head before tilting the smaller woman's face toward her own. "I love you, Samantha Riley, and I trust you implicitly. But, my Darling, you look like a temptress in that outfit. It's enough to make anyone cream their jeans."

The last statement turned the solemn moment into a jovial one. "I don't think Shawn will be creaming his jeans, Alex," Samantha giggled, "but thanks for the compliment." On tiptoe she gave Alex a peck on the cheek.

"Maybe not, but he could definitely show you that he was happy to see you." Finally, the brunette was also wearing a genuine smile. She grabbed Samantha by the arm as the blonde was walking away and spun her around to face her. "You might be going off with the beast, but not until you get a kiss of love from your Princess Charming. I want you to remember what's waiting for you at home." Gently, she bent down and placed a soft kiss on welcoming lips. Samantha's mouth opened slightly, allowing Alex's tongue to trace the perimeter before extending into the awaiting mouth. Samantha let out a purr, and Alex's heart swelled with pride.

"Tell me you're mine," the dark-haired beauty whispered into Samantha's ear.

"I'm yours, my Princess Charming, and I'll be home before this outfit turns back into rags." She gave Alex one last hug before pulling away. "I had best be going. Do you want to walk me downstairs?"

Her first reaction was to say no. Even though she knew how much Samantha loved her, she did not want to see her walking out the door with a man on her arm. Her second instinct told her that it would be best to be there by her lover's side, letting the young man know that Samantha was spoken for, or at least that she had someone waiting at home for her.

"Sure, I'll walk you down, come on."

The initial meeting was a little hard for Alex to stomach, but she had to remember that this person was an old friend of Samantha's and would naturally take the liberties that any friend would normally take. After all, she never shuddered when Sonny gave Samantha a welcoming hug and kiss. *Come on, Alex, you know that's not the same type of situation.* At any rate she withstood the meeting anew and wished them a good evening as she watched her heart walk off with another person at her side.

Turning back from the door, she walked into her office and tried to busy herself with paperwork, anything to keep from thinking of Samantha having a good time without her.

It was almost eleven by the time the cleaning people finished. Alex locked up everything but the front doors and took the elevator up to the third floor. Because she hadn't secured the front, she left the intercom on so she could police the area. At least that was the intellectual reasoning behind leaving the sound on--so she could hear any noise in the Center.

A glass of wine later she heard Samantha's laughter ringing through the front hallway.

"I had a lovely dinner, Shawn, other than your trying to talk me into leaving California. It was really good seeing you again. You'll be sure to tell you parents I said hello?"

"Yeah, I will. I had a great time, too, Sammie, and I'm sorry I couldn't convince you that you belong back in Washington." He paused in the conversation to collect his thoughts, "Do you think you could show me around the Center a little?"

"I thought you already had the VIP tour this evening, while you were waiting for me to come down?"

"One of the employees started to show me around, but we didn't get very far before you made your timely entrance." He gave her his most charming smile. "The gym area looked interesting, but I didn't get to see it all. You seem to have all the most up-to-date equipment."

"Yes, Alex has a knack for setting up businesses like this. It's what she did, sometimes still does, for a living. All her experience surely came in handy when she began furnishing this place."

"Enough talk about Alex, Samantha. Do you know that half your conversation at dinner revolved around your roommate?" There was an edge of jealousy to the man's tone.

Alex beamed at the acknowledgement of that statement. *Guess I'm around even when I'm not.* She thought about not eavesdropping any longer, but then thought a second time and decided to continue listening in on the conversation. His asking for a second tour was not sitting right with the ebony-haired beauty, and she wanted to make sure that Samantha was able to handle the advance she was certain he was going to make.

She watched the heat sensors as the couple moved from the front of the building over toward the climbing wall. She listened as Samantha told Shawn about her first attempt at climbing, conspicuously leaving out what happened after she fell. She didn't expect Samantha to go into every detail and had to be content with the fact that she did mention getting caught instead of falling on the mat.

Shawn grunted at the end of the story and mumbled something inaudible. "Want to take a swim in the pool?" he asked.

"Do you have a suit?" Samantha questioned.

"No, but there's no one but the two of us . . . "

"I don't think that would be appropriate, Shawn. Maybe it's time for you to go; I have an early schedule tomorrow." As usual, Samantha was her gracious self, ignoring the implication that had just been thrown at her.

"How about a look at the gym before I do," Shawn insisted.

"Okay, but then I think we should call it an evening."

Again Alex watched the screen as the two walked from the east side of the building to the west. She could see that he was bridging the distance between them and watched as he tried to put an arm around her lover's shoulder. Her blood began to boil, but she stood her ground, knowing that Samantha would quickly put him in his place.

One smooth move and the blonde had thrown the offending arm off her shoulder. "If you can't behave yourself, the tour will end right here and now."

Shawn gave her a wide grin, and she returned his look with a frown. "I mean it, Shawn. I'm in no mood to fend you off. We parted friends once before, and I would like for us to do the same tonight."

"What if I want to be more than a friend, Samantha?"

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

"Because it is!"

"That's no explanation, and you know it. Give me a real reason why I shouldn't pursue this area of our relationship?"

"For one, **w**e don't have a relationship, Shawn. We never have, and we never will. And more importantly, I'm already seriously involved with someone else, as if it's any of your business."

"What, with that dyke upstairs? Samantha why don't you just cooperate and admit that she's just an experiment, something to irritate your father and get his attention? It's time to stop making everyone's life miserable."

Alex could hear Samantha's intake of breath and could almost envision the look on her lover's face. Every nerve in her body told her to start for the ground floor, but she remained plastered to the area in front of the security panel.

By this time they were standing over by the gym mats. "Shawn, you don't have any idea what you're talking about and . . . how did you know about Alex and me?"

She was staring at the friend who was quickly becoming a threat, trying to conjure what she was going to say next to make him leave without starting a fight, yet wanting to know what had been said about her and Alex to him.

"I have my sources. Come on, Samantha, you're more of a woman than that," he snarled. "You can't possibly be satisfied sexually with another woman. I know it must have been a great turn-on to have someone as beautiful as Alex interested in you. I get turned on trying to imagine the two of you in bed together, but you've got to miss having something warm and throbbing inside you." He grabbed her hand and spun her around, catching her off balance.

"Something like this," he placed her hand on his swollen member. "We never did get to consummate our relationship, Samantha. But there's no time like the present. You've got me so hot just thinking about it that I can almost feel myself inside you." He pushed himself into her hand with a gyrating motion. "Come on, baby, give us a chance."

"Damn it, Shawn, leave me alone!" Unbidden tears stung her eyes as she tried to pull her hand away, but he twisted her wrist and brought her down to her knees. All her practice at martial arts was turning out to be no help at all with this surprise attack. She was wishing for all she was worth that Alex had gone to dinner with them. This would never be happening if she had.

"That's a good position for you, Sammie," Shawn growled with a hint of bitterness in his voice. He hadn't expected his overtures to be so vehemently refused. "How about a little taste of something better than pussy? I can't imagine you not liking it more. "

By this time Alex was in the elevator. It had been stationed on the third floor, so no time was wasted awaiting its arrival. She punched the ground floor button and cursed the decision she had made to refuse to go to dinner with Samantha and the asshole who was trying to defile her.

Shawn pushed Samantha onto the mat and straddled her. Placing one hand on each of her arms, he slowly slid his body down hers until they were face to face. He tried kissing her and his breath reeked of the alcohol he had consumed during dinner. Flailing her head from side to side she started to scream, but he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and placed it in her mouth, laughing at her attempts to push him off of her.

"Why are you fighting me, Samantha? I'm better for you than a stinking dyke. You don't realize what you're missing; you just haven't had the right man, yet."

With his full weight inhibiting her every move, he started to unzip his pants, all the while telling her how much he would enjoy putting his dick into her mouth. "But, I can't take that chance now can I, Sammie," he whispered into her ear. "And, of course, I wouldn't want to have to hurt you. I'll just have to settle for fucking you. But I promise to make you come better than any goddamn lesbian ever could."

Samantha's attempts to wiggle out from under the obnoxious man were futile.

Seeming to like the sound of his own voice, Shawn continued taunting her. "Admit you're hot for me, too, Sammie. Tell me you miss having a cock between your legs." Twisting slightly, he slid a hand under Samantha's pants and panties, his fingers lingering in the curly golden locks of her mound.

Before he could go any further, he felt a strong grasp on the mid section of his back and on his collar and found himself being pulled off Samantha and tossed almost effortlessly into the air. He landed on his back, totally winded.

"You okay, Samantha?" Alex asked, pulling the smaller woman off the mat, yanking the cloth from her lover's mouth, and holding her close.

"I am now," Samantha answered, relieved.

"Good." Alex gave her a quick kiss on the head before leaving her side to finish what she had just begun with the offender.

Before Samantha had a chance to react, the brunette was standing in front of a stunned Shawn. She felt more like a vigilante than a hero, but this asshole needed to be taught a lesson.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are or what you thought you were doing, but this is my home, and that's my spouse you were messing with."

He was now sitting on the ground with his head between his legs. Alex pulled him by the hair into a standing position and at the same time brought a knee up to meet with his quickly deflating

erection.

"Damn," he screamed, trying unsuccessfully to grab his crotch and protect his face at the same time. His knees buckled and tears streamed down his face, then Alex's fist made contact with his nose.

Blood spurted from the obviously broken appendage, and the man dropped to the floor in utter agony.

"Not much of a fighter now are you, lover?" Alex growled through clenched teeth. "How's it feel getting beaten up by a 'stinking dyke,' Shawn?"

"Stop it, Alex!" Samantha screamed above the outcry of the injured man. "You're going to kill him." She wedged herself between Shawn and Alex. Placing her hands on the taller woman's shoulders as she tried to reason with her. "He's not worth getting yourself in trouble, Alex. Please, stop."

"Can't do that right now, Samantha, sorry. This fucker's going to think twice before trying anything like that ever again," Alex vowed as she picked Samantha up and moved her out of the way. "I'll handle this my way, Samantha." Eyes, as cold as ice, looked from her lover back to the man sitting on the floor, holding his face and bleeding all over his hands.

"Let me call 911," Samantha pleaded. "They'll take care of him."

"No!" Shawn screamed between gasps of anguish.

"You," Alex yelled, glaring at Shawn, "give me **one** fucking reason why I shouldn't continue to be the shit out of you, and **then** turn you over to the police!"

"Because . . ." he answered, not knowing which part of his injured body to try to protect from the infuriated brunette towering over him.

"I'm listening." Alex accentuated her sentence with a kick in his ribs.

A guttural exhalation was the only sound that escaped from the wounded man's lips. With as deep a breath as he could take without instigating more pain, he tried desperately to blurt out an explanation, before Alex decided to strike him again. "This . . . wasn't . . . my idea," he gulped. "I . . . I was hired."

Alex turned to Samantha, who was standing with her mouth agape; then she turned back to Shawn. "Okay, so who paid you, *as if I don't already know*, and what exactly were you paid to do?"

"Don Riley. He called me." Shawn's sentences were curt and choppy. Taking a large breath, he attempted to clarify his actions in one fast sentence. "He gave me \$1,000 before I left Washington and told me if I succeeded in getting Samantha away from you, he would give me

\$2,000 more when I returned and help set me up in a business."

"Oh, and you thought that your debonair approach would win her heart, and she would follow you back to daddy?"

"I didn't mean for it to end like this," he was almost crying. "I hadn't intended to . . . I don't know what happened. I don't know what got into me."

"I do." Blue blades focused on his deflated manhood. Alex continued to scowl at the subjugated person sitting on the floor in front of her. "How's that throbbing between **your** legs?" she snarled. "You know, I ought to beat you senseless, just because I can."

Looking up into Alex's angered face, he begged, "Oh, God, please . . . don't hit me again! I'm sorry, Ms. Dorian, truly I am." He placed his arms in front of him to fend off imaginary strikes. "I was just trying to . . ."

"I know what you were **trying** to do." Alex grabbed him by the shirt. His hands inadequately attempted to slap her away from him. As a strong right arm swung back to deliver another blow to the already bloodied face, a small hand covered her fist.

"Please, Alex, enough. This is no solution. Look at him. He's pitiful!"

Still furious, Alex jerked her arm away from Samantha's touch determined to continue her attack.

"Alex, p-l-e-a-s-e," Samantha pleaded one more time.

The tone in Samantha's voice finally penetrated Alex's wrath, and she stopped focusing on Shawn long enough to notice the expression on her soulmate's face. Shaking her head, she released her hold on the frightened man and pushed him roughly down onto the floor. "You certainly owe Samantha a thank you, mister," she hissed.

Sad green eyes looked from the broken man to the woman she loved. "We're all pawns in this charade, Alex. My father's the real villain, and he's not here to take responsibility." Tears trickled down Samantha's face, melting her lover's rage.

Instinctively, Alex reached out to wipe away the dampness. "Don't cry, honey . . ."

Sobbing, Samantha continued, "I know what Shawn did was wrong, and by the gods, Alex, I'm glad you came in when you did, but I don't want you to hurt him any more, and I don't want to continue this discussion any longer." She turned to walk away.

"No!" Alex responded, stopping Samantha in her footsteps. "No. This needs to be discussed."

A puzzled look crossed Samantha's face as she turned and shrugged her shoulders. "The damage has already been done."

"Maybe so, but I want to know exactly what that asshole you're related to thought he would accomplish with this tactic." She turned to address the man who was riveted to the gym floor and afraid to move without being told to. "Get up, dip-shit, and fix you clothes. I won't hit you again, unless you do something else stupid to warrant it. By the way, you're lucky I didn't stuff this down your throat." She threw his handkerchief in his face and motioned for him to walk in the direction of the men's locker room. "Go on. It's time to get you cleaned up."

Giving him a push in the right direction, she motioned for Samantha to follow. When they got there she opened the door and nodded for Shawn to enter. "Make yourself presentable; we still have an explanation due us."

Alex placed an arm around Samantha's shoulders, and the two women stood watching as Shawn washed the blood off his hands and his bruised and swollen face.

While he was still cleaning up, Samantha went and got some ice from the juice bar and brought it back wrapped in a paper towel. When she handed it to him he mumbled a thank you without looking her in the face. The three of them then walked in silence toward Alex's office.

Once inside, Alex opened the liquor cabinet and poured each of them a drink.

"Sit," the executive ordered the pitiful excuse for a man, as he stood in the middle of the room holding the makeshift ice pack on his broken nose.

He slowly lowered himself into a chair and gratefully took the drink offered him.

Samantha was the first to begin the discussion she had formerly announced she didn't want to have. "What did my father think he was going to accomplish by sending you down here to Laguna?"

"I guess he thought you'd come home, with the right encouragement." He shrugged and took another sip of his drink, avoiding eye contact with the women. "I ran into him about a week ago, and he said that ever since he found out that you had become a lesbian, his life has been going down the tubes. He blames all his misfortunes on you and Ms. Dorian . . ."

"Okay, I'm tired of the Ms. Dorian stuff, you might as well call me Alex," the brunette responded in a gruff tone.

He nodded his head and continued. "Don really hates you . . . Alex. He condemns you for not only taking Samantha away but for all sorts of business failures. He said all he wants to do with his life is to make yours as miserable as you've made his."

The sorrowful expression on Samantha's face as she spoke made Alex want to weep. "I'm sorry, Alex, that doesn't even sound like the man who raised me. I don't know when he became so bitter, but after what happened here tonight, I don't trust him not to hurt Mom, or even Sally. If he would pay someone to molest me and drag me back to Washington, there's nothing I would put past him."

"I agree with you, Samantha, but I don't think we should be deliberating about family situations with Shawn here; after all he was the one who tried to rape you."

"For all it's worth," Shawn interjected, "Don doesn't have much affection for any of the women in his family." He winced at the pain caused simply by talking, but he went on. "He was trying to figure out a way to divorce his wife without giving her half of everything he owned. He said she didn't deserve anything, that she was nothing but a lazy sow, and since the children were grown there was nothing of any importance for her to live for, especially since all she delivered were girl children. I'm sorry I went along with him, it was really stupid of me. I honestly didn't start out to hurt Samantha; things just got out of hand. Not that it's any excuse, but I think I had too much to drink at dinner . . . of course I'm more than sober now."

Alex stood looking out at the ocean, trying to fix the situation firmly in her mind and come up with a solution. Finally, not turning from the window, she spoke. "Shawn, if you want to rectify yourself in Samantha's eyes and keep me from haunting you for the rest of your life," steel blue eyes turned in his direction, "and believe me, I could very well do that, I suggest that you go back to that poor excuse for a human being and tell him you tried your utmost, but that Samantha is very happy where she is. Don't make a big deal of anything, and don't discuss with him the fiasco that occurred here this evening. You got that?"

She looked at Samantha and received a nod of approval.

"Now, I suggest you say goodbye to Samantha. Be happy that I didn't beat you to a pulp when I had the chance and that we didn't have you arrested. I can't say it was a pleasure to meet you, Shawn, but it's good to know just how vindictive Don has become." Again, she turned toward the ocean, dismissing the younger man with an aristocratic air.

Almost afraid to say anything, he looked at Samantha and mouthed the words *I'm sorry*. She shrugged her shoulders and told him that she was sorry, too; sorry that the evening had gotten so ugly and sorry she had trusted him.

"I'll show myself out, Sammie." Brown puppy dog eyes, surrounded by purple bruising and accented with a swollen nose, looked into the eyes of an old friend and saw nothing but disgust. "Again, I'm sorry I was such a fool," he muttered as he walked toward the door.

Almost as an afterthought, he turned back around, gathered all the courage he could muster, and addressed the two women in the room. "I hope some day you can both find it in your hearts to forgive me." Receiving no answer, he turned and walked out the door.

The room was still and the sound of the ocean crashing on the shore far below could be heard through the vented window slots.

"I should have gone with you," Alex mumbled. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't been . . ."

"That's not true, Alex." Samantha walked to the window and stood beside her lover, putting an arm around the taller woman's waist and resting her head on Alex's chest. "Remember you once told me that everything happens for a reason? I had thought the exact same thing some time earlier during this disastrous evening, but you know what?"

"What?"

"If tonight hadn't happened like it did, I would never have believed in my heart that my father had turned into such an evil person. What scares me even more is the reaction you had tonight. You could have killed him, Alex, especially with all your martial arts training."

"At one point I wanted to kill him, Samantha. What he did was despicable! He deserved more of a beating than he received at my hands."

"But, Alex, you scared me. You were out of control."

"I'm sorry, Samantha, but if I had been truly out of control, Shawn would not have walked out of this building on his own two feet. I told you no one messes with my world and gets away with it. I'm afraid that's a part of me that's too ingrained to change in the short amount of time we've known each other. And to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I would like to totally change it; it's my defense against your being hurt."

Samantha gently traced the outline of her lover's cheek with her fingers, running them slowly over a frown that changed upon her touch into a small smile. "I love you, Alex. I wouldn't have wanted to see you being the one hauled off to jail for killing him; he's not worth it. And now, I have more problems to worry about. I need to get my mother and sister away from my dad as quickly as possible. I no longer care what happens to him, and if you can ruin him financially, all the better."

"If anger is one of the deadly sins, Samantha, vengeance is even worse, and it doesn't sound good coming from you. On the other hand, I totally agree with getting Sally and your mom away from him as quickly as we can manage it. Finish your drink, and let's go upstairs."

Minutes later they were in the apartment. Alex finished locking up and securing the Center below them.

"Want to join me in a warm bath, Alex? I feel dirty."

"You have no cause to feel that way, honey, you did nothing wrong. But to answer your question, yes, I'd love to join you."

Warm water, soft bubbles, and sweet smelling candles helped to cleanse away the physical and emotional bruises that had been received during the ordeal. Samantha sat with her back to Alex, her partner's strong arms were wrapped around her, holding her close. There would be no making love tonight; the gravity of the situation they had just been through made sure of that. But it didn't stop the lovers from sharing this quiet time of reflection.

All Samantha wanted to do was to be held safe in Alex's grasp.

All Alex wanted to do was shelter and insulate the woman she loved more than life itself and keep her safe from further atrocities. She didn't know why they were being put through such trials, but she knew that protecting Samantha was her responsibility.

When Alex started complaining about "pruning," they drained the water and extinguished the candles. The softness and warmth of the bed was a comfort to the lovers as they crawled in next to each other. Words were unnecessary, and silence acted as a buffer between what had happened earlier and the serenity of being together.

Alex realized that Samantha needed to be comforted by the security of knowing she was safe.

Samantha wanted nothing more than to crawl inside Alex's skin and escape forever from the hurt of the world around her. She thought she had been making great strides in self-preservation, but tonight's dramatic episode proved that she still had a long way to go.

While in the tub, she had questioned Alex as to how she knew there was trouble on the first floor. Her hero's answer, as usual, made perfect sense, even though Samantha felt there had been a dual reason for the security registers being on. In essence, it really didn't matter; the only important fact was that her champion had arrived in time, and for that she would always be grateful.

Now the difficult task of dealing with her father lay ahead of them. Alex had taken all of Samantha's problems on as her own and in return had given her hope for a positive future for her mother and sister. Samantha didn't know what she had done to deserve such a caring soulmate but was certain that she would spend the rest of her life making sure Alex knew how much she was loved.

"You're awfully quiet, my Destiny, whatcha thinking?"

"Oh, I'm just thankful to be here in your arms. I never feel safer than when you're wrapped around me. And, I guess I was thinking about how lucky I am to have you in my life, to help me with all these problems."

"I'm all for praise, Samantha, but I think you're forgetting that you didn't have all these problems until I came into your life."

"Actually, Alex, I really didn't have much of a life at all until you became a part of it. The problems would have surfaced somewhere along the line, perhaps from a different cause, but they would have reared their ugly heads just the same; I'm sure of it. Having you in my life makes them less distasteful and easier to work with."

"As much as we hate these trials we're put through, we've got to admit that it makes us stronger. Hate's tough on the soul, Samantha, but the more outside forces try to tear us apart, the closer we

become. I know he's your father, and I know what I told you about retaliation, but I swear by the Goddess-he will pay for his indiscretion this time."

"By the way, Alex, I've made one decision that I promise to stick with-I am definitely going to stay away from the gym at night unless you're by my side."

Blue eyes glistened as starlight shimmered into the bedroom, creating an almost mystical appearance to the room. A smile lit up Alex's beautiful face. "I think that's a very wise decision, Samantha; now get some sleep."

"Hey," Samantha looked up into Alex's face. "Did I hear you call me your spouse?"

"Yes. What did you want me to call you, my girlfriend?"

"No, it's just the first time I've ever heard you use that term."

The only answer she received was a hug and a kiss on the top of her head.

"Alex, tell me again how you felt when you first saw me on the beach, clamming with Suz."

"Don't you ever get tired of hearing that, Samantha?"

"No," came the whispered response.

Alex could hear the smile in her lover's voice.

"It always makes me feel warm inside when you tell me, and I need to feel that right now."

"Okay," Alex conceded. "I can remember thinking that you were like a breath of fresh air that swept over the coastline bringing with you splashes of sunshine. Your laughter danced on the wind and caught in my heart, making me wish I could be your friend so that I would know that same happiness."

"That's beautiful," the exhausted blonde mumbled as she surrendered to sleep.

Yes, Samantha, you are beautiful. Glancing toward the heavens the brunette said a short prayer. Thank you, Goddess, for allowing me to intervene before too much damage had been done. Please, always make sure that I'm by her side whenever she's in danger. I'll be eternally grateful.

She kissed her lover softly on the head before closing her own eyes. The expenditure of adrenaline, the wine and warm bath, and now laying here with Samantha in her arms was comforting enough to send her quickly to the land of dreams. She would tackle their obstacles in the morning; tonight she just wanted to sleep and dream of an idyllic life with Samantha.

The End of Chapter 2

Chapter 3.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ California Gold ~

by Carole Giorgio

All disclaimers may be found in Chapter 1

Feedback/Comments to WomynBard@aol.com.

Chapter 3

Not counting Saturday, there were only two more working days in the week. Alex was hoping she could begin formulating a plan to destroy Don Riley and have it set into motion before Monday. She never did have much patience when it came to affairs of the heart. She would call in all the business favors due her, if need be, to make sure that he felt the entire scope of her reach and her wrath. *I'll show you the basis of 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' You will rue the day you butted heads with me, Don Riley, **and** the day you broke your daughter's heart with your prejudice and ignorance.*

Samantha was still asleep and Alex decided to give her a break and let her continue doing so until she woke up on her own. There was nothing that needed doing today that couldn't wait until the blonde was fully rested from the ordeal of the evening before.

Alex still couldn't understand how a father could be so cruel to his own child. Her father had, by design, been absent most of her life, but she knew she held a special place in Al's heart and that he would never knowingly hurt her. It was his love for her mom's that had instigated his even being involved her in her conception. She realized, also, that she didn't have the problem of sexual orientation to deal with from any of the people her family. Had she grown up to be straight, she knew that all three of her parents would have loved her just as much as they did now, and all would have been happy that she found love in a world so void of it.

Her heart felt heavy when she thought about how she had let Shawn slither away with little to no punishment, but she would be damned if she would allow Don the same leniency. It was to her advantage that the bonds between Sheila, Sally, and Don were already breaking down; it would make it that much easier to accomplish her revenge. Her plan involved no physical violence, so she wasn't sure she needed to discuss it with Samantha. But after battling with her conscience, Samantha's hero decided that she would formulate everything, get it all in place, and then run it by her lover before actually instigating the retaliation.

Showering always seemed to be conducive to clear thinking, and this morning was no exception. First on her agenda was to place some phone calls to old colleagues. Alex laughed to herself and

shook her head at the visions running around inside her brain while she finished brushing her teeth and combing her hair. She kept thinking that she would love to be able to astral project herself to Don's side when his world started falling apart. Her adrenaline was pumping, and she felt the old surge of competition ignite a spark within her that she thought had been extinguished.

Coming out of the bathroom, Alex smiled as she looked over at her sleeping beauty. Samantha hadn't moved from her position on the bed the entire time the brunette bathed and dressed, except to grab Alex's pillow and wrap her arms around it.

Before leaving the bedroom, Alex wrote a note and posted it to the mirror-*See you when you get up, sweetheart. I'll more than likely be in my office. Love you, Me.* She blew a kiss in the direction of the sleeper and marched into the kitchen for something to eat and drink.

The Center was still quiet when she arrived downstairs, so before heading for her sanctuary, she unlocked the doors and was greeted by the first of the employees, who were patiently waiting for one of the key-carrying supervisors to arrive.

Minutes later she was sitting behind her desk organizing her strategy. Carrying out her plan was easier to accomplish once she was in the confines of her office; all her business numbers were stored on the computer there. Her heart actually felt lighter after speaking to a couple of the executives from Have It All. More than a few of the now top execs in the company had had dealings with Riley on their way up the corporate ladder. No one liked him very much, and his arrogance was well known in the field. They both were more than willing to offer Alex all the help she needed in bringing about his demise. She asked one of the men she had personally helped to promote, Phil Counsile, to fax her a copy of all the accounts they had "allowed" ZZ Medi-aide to win, accounts they really hadn't wanted to take the time to fight for. Phil told Alex that he would go her one better. They had kept a separate file on Don Riley and the accounts they had crossed paths with the man to either get or not get. If Alex wanted just Riley's files and those of the salesmen directly under him, she would have them by the end of the afternoon. Ecstatic, Alex took her headset off and clapped her hands. She stood, turned around, stretched, and gazed through the window at the rippling waves, the tips of which were sparkling with specks of gold from the morning sunlight. *Yes, this is definitely going to be a productive day!*

Looking at the clock, she saw that it was almost ten and Samantha hadn't made an appearance. It was definitely time to take a break and go see if Samantha was still sleeping or if she just didn't feel like coming down to the Center this morning. It wasn't like Samantha not to at least call if she wasn't coming, so Alex assumed that her lover was still in dreamland.

When the elevator door opened on the third floor, Alex knew immediately that Samantha was awake. The aroma of breakfast strips and coffee pleasantly assaulted her nostrils.

"I hope you're not planning on consuming whatever it is you are cooking all by yourself," the executive announced as she entered the apartment and then the kitchen.

"Absolutely not," came the instant reply, as the blonde turned from the stove to smile at her lover. "You must have radar. I was just getting ready to call and tell you it was time for a mid-

morning break. I figured there wasn't anything pressing for me to accomplish this morning or you would have had me up and showering before you left the apartment."

"You've got me all figured out," Alex responded, walking over and putting her arms around the smaller woman's waist. "This doesn't seem to be an important day for working, and you looked so peaceful sleeping with your arms wrapped around my pillow that I couldn't bring myself to wake you up." She grabbed a piece of the meat substitute and popped it into her mouth before getting her hand slapped.

"Can't you wait?"

"Nope." Alex smiled as she reached for another, knowing that she would never get away with grabbing two. She put her hands up in an *I give up* gesture and kissed Samantha on the cheek. "Want me to pour the tea?"

"Please. Doing something helpful will keep you out of harm's way, and I'll be able to finish cooking. I'm just about done, so you can sit down after you put the juice and silverware on the table."

"How ya doing this morning, Samantha?" Alex queried, trying to catch the first expression that crossed her partner's face.

"Okay, Alex." She looked at her lover and saw pain in the sapphire blue eyes. "Really, I'm okay," she reiterated. "I probably should have expected something like . . ."

"Don't even finish that sentence! There is no way in hell you should have **expected** anything of the kind. I guess what I really want to know is if you're still mad enough to want a bit of payback?"

"You're not going to have him physically hurt, are you Alex?"

The grimace on Samantha's face reinforced what the brunette already knew in her heart; there would be no dealing with Don on a physical level. She would have to get him in his pocketbook.

"No, honey, I'm not, but you need to call your sister today and tell her what happened here last night."

Silence engulfed the room.

Alex finished placing the juice on the table and walked back into the kitchen, taking Samantha in her arms. "Talking about it can't be pleasant, Samantha, but the sooner you contact your sister . . ."

"I know, Alex. Can we eat a nice breakfast first?"

"Most definitely." She kissed Samantha on the head and squeezed her tightly. "Want me to go sit

down?"

"Yeah, but you can take these with you." Samantha handed Alex both of their plates and then grabbed the one piled with pancakes.

Even though they tried to keep the conversation cheerful, hints of what had happened the night before continued to creep into the breakfast chatter. Tears occasionally mingled with syrup, but by the time the two had finished eating, Samantha could talk about the incident without crying.

Alex told her to forget work for the day. There was nothing pressing happening down in the Center and taking care of personal business was more important. On a lighter note, she mentioned that she didn't want Samantha frightening the clients away with her swollen eyes.

"Do I look that bad?" Samantha questioned.

"No! I'm only kidding with you to get you to feel better."

"Oh, then smile when you say things like that."

Alex gave the smaller woman a kiss good-bye and a thank you for a great brunch before heading back down to the office. "I'll expect a full report when I come back up." She turned and left the apartment.

Samantha gathered up the dishes and piled them on the counter, her eyes again filling with tears as she ran over in her mind what she would say to Sally about what had transpired the evening before. She decided to make the call while she felt brave and left the dishes for later. Instead of dialing Sally's work number, she inadvertently dialed her home phone.

After four rings, Samantha realized that she had dialed the wrong number and was just about to hang up when Sally answered. With resolve Samantha pushed aside her inclination to hang up anyway and call back later and instead spoke in a soft voice to her sister.

"Hi, Sally. What are you doing home on a Monday?"

"Hi, to you, too, Sammie, and what are you doing calling me at home on a Monday if you thought I wasn't going to be here?" Sally answered her sister with a question of her own and a giggle in her tone.

"Actually, I dialed the number out of habit," Samantha answered, relaxing a little at the sound of her sister's voice.

"Okay, I'll buy that. So, what's up?"

There was an awkward silence on the phone line.

Realizing that it was unlike her sister to be so quiet, Sally took the lead and started the

conversation.

"Now you have me worried, Sammie. Why the silent treatment?"

"I was just trying to figure out how to start the conversation. It's not one I relish having over the phone, but I have no other choice."

"Gosh! Is something wrong with Alex? Did something happen between you two? I know, you had your first fight!"

"No, Sally, it has nothing to do with Alex. She's fine. I'm fine. We're fine. This has to do with Daddy."

The tremor in Samantha's voice did not escape her sister's ear.

"Daddy? Come on, Samantha, the easiest way to breach what can only be a horrible topic is to open your mouth and spill it all out as quickly as possible. You know, like we used to do when we were kids. Don't breathe until the entire situation is expelled."

Even though Sally was trying to make it easier for her big sis, she knew that the news was not going to be something easy to swallow. Her father had been acting terrible at home over the past month, and whatever Samantha had to reveal was probably the culmination of whatever it was that was making him such a bastard.

Samantha took a deep breath and tried to focus all her energy on doing exactly what Sally had suggested. "I think I told you when I talked to you that I was going to have dinner with Shawn McDouglas when he was down here on business. Well, anyway, I did. We came back to the Center afterward, and I started to show him around downstairs. He started talking about my coming back home, and then he made a pass at me. When I refused him, he got obnoxious. He called Alex a dyke. One thing led to another, and before I knew it he had me down on the gym floor, trying to rape me." She could hear Sally gasp on the other end of the phone line, but continued quickly before she lost her nerve. "Alex came down and beat the shit out of him. In the middle of everything he blurted out that the entire setup was Daddy's idea. It was horrible, Sally. I didn't realize up until that point that Daddy hated me so much."

"Goddamn son of a bitch," Sally hissed.

Samantha breathed deeply and exhaled. "Yeah."

"Are you okay, Sammie? Physically, I mean?"

"Yeah, the hurt is definitely more emotional."

"I can imagine," her sister agreed.

Samantha continued to fill Sally in on everything that Shawn had told them, and by the end of

the conversation Sally had promised to go to their parent's house as soon as she got off the phone with Samantha and tell their mother what had happened.

"I can't decide what I hate him for the most, Sam," Sally blurted out when her sister was finished with her story. "Damn him! And the nerve of him trying to cut Mom out of what she deserves for having stayed by his slimy side all these years."

"As far as the divorce goes," Samantha interjected, "when Mom decides to file, that is, Alex has offered to have her lawyers represent her."

"I think Mom will appreciate the offer, Samantha. It will take one heavy load off her shoulders. I don't know how she will ever repay Alex . . ."

"No need, Sally . . . we're all family now and Alex even said they're on retainers. They get paid whether they work or not, and she figured this would give them something to work on."

"Are they divorce lawyers, Samantha?"

"I don't know; I only know that if they're attorneys for the Dorians they have clout and they are the best that money can buy. If Alex thinks they can handle the case, I'm sure they can."

"I suppose you're right. Mom's been ready to leave him longer than either of us ever expected; it's just that she has been dependent on him for so many years, she's afraid to venture out on her own. It's funny in a way; she raised us to think for ourselves and to go after what we wanted out of life, the two things she never had instilled in her."

"It's never too late to learn, Sally, and Mom's a quick learner. Alex and I have even talked about having Mom open a New Age-type of store here in Laguna if she wants to get away from Dad. We think it would be successful here, and it would give Mom some self-confidence as well as making her a decent living without her having to rely on Dad for anything."

"We can talk about that later, Samantha; we need to take one thing at a time. For now, it's letting Mom know what happened to you last night and who instigated the sordid affair. I can almost guarantee that that, coupled with Alex's offer of legal help, will encourage Mom to get her act together and leave that son of a bitch."

"Listen, before I hang up, there's one other thing I want you and Mom to think about. You have both been invited to spend Thanksgiving with us at Alex's parent's house in La Jolla."

"Sammie . . . I don't know what to . . ."

"Just ask Mom as soon as you can and get back to me. I'd like to give them an answer before the nineteenth."

"Okay, Samantha. I'll get back to you on that. I'm hoping she'll have him move out of the house, but I'm afraid he's going to throw a fit about that after all you've told me tonight."

"Again, Sally, that's where the lawyers come in. They can advise Mom on what to do. Have her call me, or you call, whichever she feels more comfortable with, and we'll take it from there."

A few more repartees passed between the sisters before they finally said good-bye, with the promise to be back in touch with each other by the beginning of the following week.

Samantha hung up the phone and sighed. She could make it through the weekend before hearing what her Mother had decided about how and when to finally leave her father. Waiting a few more days would be an easy accomplishment after having realized that the end was positively in sight for a marriage that had long outlasted its viability.

The kitchen was once again clean, and the blonde had been sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, watching the ocean as it ebbed and flowed in a hypnotizing cadence. She shook herself out of her reverie and called Alex to fill her in on how most of the conversation with Sally had gone, including the discussion about the lawyers. Alex announced that she would call the attorneys immediately and ready them for an assignment she was sure would turn nasty. The executive then promised to be finished with work by six, adding that the other therapist and Angel could have the responsibility of closing up the Center.

The aroma of an Italian deli drifted through the air, as Alex exited the elevator on the third floor.

"I didn't know you had Italian in your bloodline," Alex commented after passing through the already open apartment door.

"I'm sure somewhere down the line I had Roman blood in one of my incarnations," Samantha replied smiling. "Or perhaps I was a Greek poet and got to venture to the land of pasta and vino occasionally to trade with famous chefs, bartering recipes for odes."

Laughing at Samantha's quick wit, Alex entered the kitchen and took the wooden spoon out of the smaller woman's hand. She spun her around and kissed her passionately.

"I've been waiting all afternoon to come home and do that."

"Hmmm," was the only response she received from her lover, other than a huge grin and slight tilt of her head.

While Alex continued to hold Samantha close, she looked eagerly over the smaller woman's shoulder at the pot on the stove.

"I love pasta, and this smells fantastic!"

"It's one of my specialties. If you're wondering why you don't see the spaghetti, it's because I made lasagna." She pulled away from her lover's arms to open the oven and pull out a pan of

food fit for the gods.

"And we eat when?" Alex asked.

"As soon as you start the music and pour the wine," Samantha answered, pointing toward the dining area.

The brunette looked in the direction Samantha indicated to behold a fully dressed table.

"You can light the candles, also, if you want to," Samantha added. "I need to go powder my nose, then we can sit down and eat."

Dinner was elegant, and conversation for the most part was pleasant. Samantha wanted to put the memory of her telephone discussion with her sister out of her mind, if only for the rest of the evening. Tonight she just wanted to be with Alex and to forget that the rest of the world existed—especially Don Riley. In the light of day she would deal with whatever she needed to, but tonight she wanted to make believe that her hero had swept her away to a castle in the clouds where she would be protected from the evil villains of the world. Tonight she would drown herself in sapphire eyes kissed by starlight and lips that were as sweet as nectar.

Dinner had turned out to be everything Samantha had planned. The contented look on Alex's face as she savored the home-cooked meal and delivered constant compliments through nonverbal as well as verbal exclamations made all the time she'd spent in the kitchen more than worthwhile.

Samantha got lost in her daydreams as she tried to imagine a more idyllic life than living on this cliff estate, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Try as she would, she couldn't. Here was where she wanted to remain forever, listening to soft music, drinking mellow wine, and dining on excellent food, with the added privilege of sharing the rest of her life with the gorgeous woman who sat across the table from her.

Alex spoke and her daydream ended.

Cleanup, they decided, would wait until morning. The table was abandoned, left cluttered with scraped clean but unwashed dishes. Samantha insisted on putting the perishables away while Alex readied the living room. The dark-haired beauty scattered pillows on the floor close to the floor-to-ceiling windows and then poured the remainder of the wine into their goblets.

The view from the penthouse beckoned the lovers. The movement of the waves caught the shimmering beams from the moon as they danced upon the water far below. To enhance the effects, the wind played a symphony that the lovers imagined as being composed for their ears only.

The day had been emotionally long and tiring for the small blonde, yet despite that, she had big plans in mind for the rest of the evening when she leaned back into Alex's chest. Her lover held her tightly as they continued to listen to the mesmerizing music of the waves, crashing on the

shore far below. The last glass of wine she had consumed turned out to be less of an aphrodisiac and more of a sedative, and she soon fell sound asleep snuggled comfortably in the arms of love.

The sun was beginning to streak through the bedroom windows when Samantha awoke with a start. She quickly sat up in bed and listened to the sound of the shower coming from the other room.

Gods be damned, Alex, you let me fall asleep! she cursed under her breath. *I had plans for last night.* "I had plans for last night," she repeated, screaming the words into the air.

"Did you say something?" Alex yelled from the bathroom as she turned off the running water.

"Nothing of any importance," Samantha mumbled. She let out her frustrations by hitting on the pillows before resigning herself to having missed the opportunity she had spent all of yesterday afternoon preparing for.

The End of Chapter 3

Chapter 4.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ California Gold ~

by Carole Giorgio

All disclaimers may be found in Chapter 1

Feedback/Comments to WomynBard@aol.com.

Chapter 4

Alex and Samantha had closed the Center from the twenty-fourth through the twenty-ninth of November, giving everyone an extended weekend with pay. Business had prospered far beyond original expectations, and Alex could see no reason not to share the good fortune with their employees. Things were always quieter around the holidays anyway, so there was no real reason not to give everyone a break. They would all come back refreshed, and she was sure attitudes would be elevated.

Samantha hated leaving Rainbow behind, but Alex assured her that Angel had promised to check in on her. She further contended that the small ball of fluff would be much more comfortable in her own home for the short amount of time they would be gone.

The weather had begun to cool, and the days seemed to gallop toward the beginning of the holiday season. Thanksgiving would be just the start of many parties and dinners the two women had already been invited to attend.

Neither Samantha nor Alex could remember a happier time. They had been slightly dismayed when Sonny and Ray bowed out of joining them for the holiday, but Sonny assured them they would all get together, if not before the end of the year then for Alex's birthday.

The only blot on Samantha's merriment was when she allowed thoughts about her parents' situation to creep into her mind. She tried not to make the divorce a topic she dwelled upon, but she was well aware that because of Alex's intervention, her father's business dealings had been on the decline, causing his status in ZZ Medi-aide to dissipate, and that his actions at home were becoming volatile.

Two days after her conversation with Sally, Samantha had received a phone call from her mother. A tearful discourse ensued where the small blonde had to reiterate the entire tale of that fateful November evening. She had listened intently to her mother's quick intakes of breath, which only made the tale more difficult to tell. In her heart Samantha had known that her mother would want to hear all the details firsthand, but that realization had not untied the knot in her stomach that remained throughout the entire conversation.

Now Thanksgiving was upon them, and Samantha was doing her best to keep the spirit of thankfulness close to her heart. Lucky for her, just looking at Alex made that an easy task.

Sheila and Sally had both accepted the invitation to a weekend stay at the Dorians' in La Jolla, and Samantha was looking forward with a bittersweet feeling to seeing her mother and sister again. It would be the first time since her marriage that Sheila Riley would be without Don on such a special occasion. Samantha was no fool; she was aware that this was going to be an intermittently marvelous and difficult visit.

Alex's lawyers had been in touch with Sheila the day following her phone call to Samantha, and the actual filing of divorce papers had taken place on the twenty-second of the month. Now it was Wednesday evening, the twenty-fourth of November, and Sheila and Sally were on their way from Washington to California.

Don was still living at the house, conspicuously spending less and less time there. Even though their relationship was more over than not, he had no idea that Sheila was not going to be home for Thanksgiving.

Avoiding eye contact most of the morning, Sheila had made herself scarce around the house and watched from the upstairs bedroom window as Don's car left the driveway and he headed for work. She then retrieved her suitcase from the attic and quickly packed. Luggage at her side, she was waiting on the front porch when Sally arrived less than an hour later to drive them to the

airport.

Don would find the note she had left on the mantle when he arrived home. The only information she had given was that she would be spending both the holiday and the weekend with friends. Even if he did figure out that she was with Samantha, Sheila was confident there was no way for him to get in touch with her. All the phones at the Dorian residence were unlisted, and she had made sure to bring the only copy she had of the address and phone number with her.

Alex and Samantha arrived at the villa in La Jolla before noon so they could settle in and be ready to meet Sheila and Sally's plane in San Diego later in the evening. The house was already bustling with excitement.

Before Alex had a chance to open the front door, the housekeeper did it for her and greeted them with a smile. "Your mom said you would be arriving early today, Miss Alex. Welcome home."

"Thanks, Esmerelda, it's good to be here. Are Mom and Kelley around?"

"Si. They're in the kitchen talking to the new cook Miss Aurora hired to prepare tomorrow's feast." Samantha's look of shock elicited a wink and a smile from the housekeeper. "She's going all out this year, Miss Samantha, what with you and your people joining the family."

Alex shook her head and grinned. "She'll never change, Esmerelda; we all know that."

"I don't think we would want her to," the older woman stated while ushering Alex and Samantha into the house. "Hurry in and let your moms know you've arrived. I'll get one of the new crew to bring in your luggage."

"New crew?"

"Yes, we have a full staff for the occasion. I suppose Miss Aurora wanted to relax and enjoy her guests this year, especially since you're home."

After agreeing with the housekeeper, Alex gave her an affectionate hug. Samantha followed suit before they quickly disappeared into the house.

Kelley greeted her daughters briefly, the reunion being interrupted with a summons from the kitchen by an impatient Aurora who, in the next breath, chanted a hello to the girls.

Kelley left the room and returned in less than a minute with two Brandy Alexanders.

"Your mother couldn't conceive of a holiday not starting off with one of her favorite drinks." The tall woman smiled as she handed Alex and Samantha each a glass brimming with the sweet tan-colored liquid. "I told her you could only have one before driving to the airport. We all know how well you handle traffic tickets." Kelley winked as she retreated to the kitchen for a drink of

her own.

"What did she mean by that?" Samantha asked.

"Thanks a lot, Kelley," Alex yelled at the older woman's back, trying to avoid the question.

"Well?" Samantha insisted.

"It's just her way of getting me riled."

"No, no. You're not getting out of this that easily." Samantha sat down with a quizzical look on her face.

"All right, she's referring to the fact that I got a lot of DUIs in my rebellious days. She called in a multitude of favors to keep me from losing my license. Blame it on youth."

"More like blame it on being a spoiled only child," Samantha giggled.

Laughter came from the vicinity of the kitchen, and ice blue daggers darted in that direction. "You two are not at all amusing," Alex called out.

"Oh, don't be so stuffy," Aurora chided as she walked into the living room, drink in hand, followed by a still beaming Kelley. "Samantha has to learn about your weaknesses as well as your strong points."

"Not necessarily, Mom," Alex disagreed, "especially if they no longer exist."

Lifting an eyebrow, the smaller woman looked at her daughter and shook her head. "Am I to believe that all of your faults have miraculously disappeared since meeting Sam?"

"No," Alex protested sarcastically, "but you could at least let her find my *faults* on her own. And . . . to your surprise, I just may not have as many as I used to."

"Okay, you two," Kelley interjected. "I didn't mean to start a family feud. I was only kidding." She looked at Samantha, who was taking in the family dynamics. "I'm sure our girl has changed; we all do when we grow up. But I do believe you might want to get a hint every now and again of who Alex used to be. She was quite a handful at times, and I think payback's only fair." She looked at her daughter with a twinkle in her eyes.

"How about we call a truce and agree not to mention my imperfections while Sheila and Sally are here. If you do that for me, I promise to let you fill Samantha in on all the gory details of my misspent youth a little at a time."

"Sounds like a plan," Samantha chimed in, lifting her glass.

Everyone followed suit and in unison mumbled "Here, here." Thus, the first holiday toast of the

season was achieved.

The remainder of the morning seemed to fly by, and soon it was time to pick up the Riley women at the airport. Aurora suggested the girls take her car; after all, there was no room in the Boxster to fit all four women, let alone the luggage.

Most of the ride from the airport consisted of Samantha asking questions and Sheila trying her best to keep a positive attitude while answering. Alex attempted to change the subject a few times, receiving an appreciative smile from the woman in the back seat. Unfortunately, Samantha wasn't getting the hint, and every time Alex managed to get the topic changed, she would eventually turn it back to what had been happening in Washington for the past month or so.

Occasionally, when she couldn't stand the level of stress that was building in the car, Sally would interject from out of the blue that California weather was absolutely beautiful. But she mostly just sat quietly and listened to her mother and sister discussing family problems.

Soon they were approaching the villa. After Samantha's birthday, Sally had given her mother a full account of what to expect when they reached Cielo en Tierra, but Sheila's first glimpse of the estate and surrounding panorama took her breath away. "How lucky you were to have grown up in such a beautiful atmosphere, Alex," she exclaimed as they passed the entrance gate and began their ascent up the driveway.

Samantha smiled as she watched a slight rose color creep into her lover's cheeks. She knew that a comment about the lifestyle into which the dark-haired beauty was born was akin to an Achilles heel. Sometimes it seemed to Samantha that Alex was ashamed of her affluence, as though it was a curse instead of a luxury. Of course that was the Alex she knew; she found it difficult to relate her Alex with the one of years gone by.

Introductions were informal and comfortable. Within minutes Aurora was whisking Sheila off to give her the grand tour. Samantha could see relief in Alex's body language when she realized the job of hostess would not be hers. She smiled when Sheila's appreciative exclamations drifted off into the distance as the two older women wandered from room to room.

The remainder of the afternoon was filled with cloistered conversations.

Sheila and Aurora had become fast friends and spent hours sharing stories of Alex and Samantha's childhoods.

Samantha cornered Sally on the veranda to get the rest of the news involving her mom and dad, sans the sugar coating Sheila could not seem to resist.

Finally, seeing a way out for both her and Alex, Kelley challenged her daughter to a game of chess.

Conversation continued through an elegant dinner, held in a small, private room at one of the local restaurants. When everyone was eating and conversation was at a lull, Sheila commented on the sound of the ocean permeating into the room. "It sounds as if we are right on the beach instead of high on a cliff looking down."

"That's the idea," Kelley chuckled. "They have the ocean wired for sound." She pointed to the overhead speakers strategically placed in the corners of the room. "It's surround sound," she continued. "There's a microphone somewhere out on one of the porches and somehow the only sounds it picks up are those along the shoreline."

"Wow," was Sally's response. "How ingenious."

The small group had dined early enough to take a short walking tour of LaJolla before they headed back to the villa for nightcaps and bed. It had been decided that Kelley would orchestrate breakfast, with Alex and Sally as her kitchen crew. Aurora, Samantha, and Sheila were thrilled at the chance to sleep until the meal was prepared.

Sheila and Sally had said their goodnights and retired to their room to unpack. Kelley and Alex were still out by the pool in deep discussion. Samantha took the opportunity to try to convince Aurora that it wasn't necessary to have a cook prepare Thanksgiving dinner. "Everyone pitching in to make dinner would be a lot of fun," the vivacious blonde wheedled. "It's our first Thanksgiving with all of us together."

A knowing smile crossed Aurora's lips. "That, my dear Samantha, is precisely why we **should** have a catered affair. All of us get to do nothing but relax and visit."

"Besides, Samantha," she continued, "I think your mother would rather spend some quality time with you, out of the kitchen, dontcha think?"

"When you put it that way, how could I say no?" Samantha smiled.

"Also, I seem to recall Alex informing me that cleanup is not one of your favorite chores." Aurora chuckled as she gave Samantha a hug. "I think everyone will have a better time this way, honey." Shaking her finger at the blonde she added, "There's no sense in wasting your breath trying to convince me otherwise, young lady."

"And I think Sam knows you well enough not to push the subject, Mom," Alex interjected as she approached her two favorite women and placed a loving arm around her mate. "I might also add that I absolutely agree with Mom. Thanksgiving should be a relaxing day for all of us." As an afterthought she appended, "That way we can really be thankful."

"As if we aren't already, Alex," the small blonde giggled, teasingly inserting an elbow into her lover's ribs.

Alex feigned pain, but the twinkle in her eyes was unmistakably gleeful.

Aurora informed her daughters that supervising the meal could be just as taxing as cooking it. "I think it's time I call it an evening. I just want you to know that I'm thrilled you're all here." She kissed each of the girls and left them standing in the kitchen.

The day had been a long one for everyone. Tomorrow would be the beginning of a four-day vacation. There would be plenty of time to fill with conversation and visiting.

Before crawling into bed next to Alex, Samantha had checked on her mom and sister to say goodnight a second time and to make sure they were settled in. She was elated that they were here and had accepted the invitation to spend the weekend. She smiled and snuggled closer to her lover. In her mind's eye she relived all the excitement of seeing her family again. She gave Alex a hug, silently thanking the tall beauty for coming into her life. As an unbidden tear slipped from her eye and trickled down her cheek, a small sigh escaped her lips. It did not go unnoticed by the brunette who had been lost in her own thoughts of thanksgiving. When she felt the warm moisture on her bare chest, Alex was quickly brought back into the present. Bewildered, she gently lifted the smaller woman's chin, and aided by the lunar light streaming through the windows she gazed at the glistening cheek.

"Tears?"

"Of joy, Alex," Samantha sniffled and grinned up at the face she loved. "Thank you for inviting them here."

"Don't go there, Samantha," Alex answered, kissing her lover's damp face. "I'm as thrilled as you are that they're here, and you know my mom is definitely in her element with two novices to show around the villa and the town." She glanced at the clock on the nightstand just as the hand twitched to midnight. "Ah . . . and so it begins, our day of Thanksgiving."

"I'll start it off saying that I'm thankful I slipped on the climbing wall and into the arms of my Champion," Samantha whispered.

Alex shook her head and sighed. "Now I **know** it's time for you to get some sleep. Sweet dreams, my Destiny." She added softly, "I'm glad I was there to catch you."

The smaller woman nuzzled closer and kissed Alex softly on the neck. "Sweet dreams to you, too. See you in the morning."

As usual, Kelley and Alex both awoke with the first rays of dawn. Their bonding time in the kitchen was pleasantly interrupted when Sheila joined them. She joked as she entered the room that she wished she had taken breadcrumbs to bed with her so it would have been easier to find her way back.

Before the coffee finished perking and the tea properly steeped, the outside entrance door to the kitchen opened and Esmerelda walked in, followed by a rigid looking older woman dressed in a

starched white pants suit.

"Miss Kelley, Miss Alex, and Miss Samantha's mom, this is Jeanette, the cook Miss Aurora hired to prepare dinner."

Introductions were nearly complete when two young women filed into the kitchen carrying armloads of utensils.

"You can never be too prepared." The gray-haired woman smiled, extending her hand first to Kelley, then Alex, and finally to Sheila. She motioned for the girls to put their cumbersome loads on the counter.

"These are my girls, Autumn and Dawn. I might have to be away from home for the holiday, but when they come to help me, it doesn't seem so much like work." Her smile was sincere and her handshake firm.

"Welcome to Cielo en Tierra, Jeanette," Kelley announced, offering her hand to the cook. "We promise not to be too demanding and to stay out of your way as much as possible." Her gray eyes twinkled with the final statement, putting the new employee and her daughters at ease.

The morning disappeared, and as dinnertime approached, delicious odors drifted from the kitchen into all areas of the villa.

Once the entire meal was prepared and laid out on the table and the kitchen mess partially cleaned, Kelley graciously dismissed Esmerelda, Jeanette, and her entourage. "We have more than enough people here to take care of cleaning up after ourselves. Go home and spend some time with your families before the day is over. Esmerelda, Jorge is out in the garage; please tell him on your way out that it's time he went home for dinner."

Esmerelda began to protest that she could serve before leaving but was gently ushered out the kitchen door behind the other women. "Happy Thanksgiving to you all," Kelley voiced to their backs.

The extended family was soon seated around the dining room table. A small golden-brown turkey resided next to a tofu beast, surrounded by all the vegetables and salads that ceremoniously accompanied a traditional Thanksgiving feast.

Glasses were filled and raised, and Kelley stood to toast the day with gratitude for being able to have her family and friends at her side. "May this be the beginning of a Dorian/Riley tradition. Days such as this are twice blessed for both the occasion and the company . . . Let's eat!"

There was no need for more encouragement. Bowls were passed around and plates were filled. The conversation varied and drifted until everyone was so engrossed in eating that the only sounds were those of silverware touching china.

Samantha giggled as she realized that no one had murmured a word in at least two minutes. "I

can see I'm not the only one with a healthy appetite today."

"Absolutely not," her sister agreed.

Samantha looked at Alex, and then her eyes swept over the entire table, encompassing all the people in her world who were precious to her. Her heart was filled with a joyous expectation that life would continue to be good, but there was still that small dark place that ached for the way things used to be with her own family. Earlier in the day her mother had finally discussed what had been happening at home and filled Samantha in on how her father had become more and more forlorn with every passing day. She had described his paranoid, dark moods and told her daughter that they seemed to be getting more and more frequent. She said that his position in the firm was being challenged and the harder he fought, the worse things seemed to get. His input had been crucial in the formation of the company, and now that it had become one of the largest medical equipment firms in the country, he was becoming an unnecessary burden. He was losing grip on more than just his business; he was losing touch with reality. Sheila told Samantha that she was scared to be alone with him. To make matters worse, his outbursts were no longer merely verbal; he was becoming physically violent when contradicted in even the smallest of ways.

Aurora had sensitively intruded on the mother/daughter discussion at precisely the right moment, excusing herself and then reminding Sheila of a discussion they had shared on the phone a few days earlier.

Samantha recalled the glint in Aurora's eyes as she relayed the promise she and Sheila had made to each other. "I told your mother that we would have a show-and-tell session. She promised to bring some of your childhood photographs with her, and I promised to share some of Alex's in return."

The two mothers had shut themselves up in the den for hours, and only the announcement that dinner was served had pried them away from their precious memories.

Samantha was brought out of her reflective mood when she felt a familiar hand clasp her own under the table.

"Our families were meant to be as one, my Destiny," Alex whispered into her lover's ear. "Happy Thanksgiving."

Samantha turned to receive quick kiss on the lips. "Happy Thanksgiving, back at ya, my Princess Charming," she purred.

Kelley was about to make a taunting comment about public displays of affection when the doorbell rang. She cursed silently for not having made sure the outer gates were locked after the help had left. Before she had a chance to push away from the table, Samantha was on her feet and exiting the dining area.

"I'm closest, I think I can manage to answer the door." With a twinkle in her eyes, she added,

"Ya think maybe Sonny and Ray decided to join us after all?"

Alex yelled, "Dreamer!" as the blonde disappeared down the corridor.

The door rang one more time, and Alex could hear Samantha telling the person on the outside of the building that she was on her way. The brunette cocked her head, trying to listen to the conversation but was distracted when someone asked her to pass the potatoes.

Samantha increased her pace when the bell chimed again. She mentally chastised the visitor for an obvious lack of patience, but called out in a pleasant voice that she was on her way. Without a thought of looking through the peephole, she opened the door wide.

"Well, if it isn't Number One Daughter," an insidious voice spat through clenched teeth before rough arms reached out and grabbed Samantha, pulling her close. "Not one word, little sweetheart, or it might just be your last."

Her heart fell to the pit of her stomach and she felt like she was going to lose the dinner she had just begun to enjoy. "Daddy," Samantha whispered.

"Don't call me that, you Jezebel," he hissed, drawing her closer to him and allowing her to feel the pressure of cold metal against her side.

By the gods, he's holding a gun on me. Terror struck and her knees began to give way as he pushed her in the direction she had just come from.

She tried to slow to a halt, but his strength moved them both along at a quickened pace.

"Take me to them," he ordered in a dangerously quiet voice.

"No," Samantha pleaded.

"Tell me **no** again and it might just be the last word you utter. I know your mother and sister are here. I'm not the fool that bitch thinks I am." Her pushed her forward. "I can find them on my own if I have to, you know."

He was right and she knew it. If she was in the same room with Alex, at least she might stand a chance of survival. She had seen her lover in action before and had confidence that she would find some way to turn this situation around.

"Okay, Daddy," Samantha breathed.

His grip tightened again, causing the small blonde to wince in pain. "I told you **not** to call me that!"

"K," Samantha gulped.

Cheerful sounds of conversation floated toward them as they neared the dining room. Don Riley's clutch remained firm around his daughter's waist as she guided them toward the unsuspecting little group.

Sheila was facing the door and let out a scream of anguish when her daughter and husband appeared in the archway.

Sally grabbed her mother's arm.

Alex and Kelley began to rise from their chairs, only to be stopped as a pistol appeared from near Samantha's ribs, the barrel now resting on the blonde's temple.

"Not a move from either of you deviates," the intruder spat, waving the gun to indicate they should not rise. "I have some family topics to discuss. Remain seated, unless I tell you differently. I'm in charge here, Alexis Dorian; this is not a bartering table."

Bloodshot eyes darted from one face to another along the table, pausing only long enough to chill each diner to the bone.

One of Alex's strong points was negotiation. Her mind was spinning as she tried her damndest to formulate a way out of this crisis. It was obvious Don had been drinking and equally obvious he was **not** in his right mind. Just as she was about to open her mouth, he pushed Samantha closer to the table, toward her mother.

"Why did you feel it necessary to try to hide where you were going from me?" Tight eyes bore down on his wife and darted between her and his younger daughter. "And you, I thought better of you," he fumed at Sally.

"How . . ." Sheila began.

An evil laugh erupted. "Did you say how?" He laughed again. "I have my ways, bitch. But you made it easy; you were stupid enough to leave the tablet you wrote the phone number and address on by the telephone. A child's game, you know, retrieving the residue indentation on a writing pad. Just a little penciling and viola-gotcha!"

His demeanor changed slightly, and Alex could have sworn she saw the glitter of a tear in the manic man's eyes.

He's gone completely bonkers, she thought to herself as she watched the scene before her. It was imperative to formulate a plan to get Samantha out of harm's way.

"Don . . ." Sheila begged.

"Shut up," he countered.

"But you asked-"

"Not now," he continued. "I don't really want to know. I just want to get Sally and take her home. You can stay in Satan's den with the rest of these transgressors, but my little girl doesn't belong here."

Sally couldn't believe what was happening. She jumped to her feet. "Daddy-"

"Don't move," he ordered, holding the gun closer to Samantha's head.

"But-"

"No, I can't trust any of you! I can see that now," he screamed.

Kelley's soft, calming voice broke through the hysteria. "Why don't you sit down and discuss the situation with your wife and daughter, Mr. Riley?"

"Huh?" Confusion replaced anger on Don's face.

"Let Samantha go and-"

"No!" He held his elder daughter tighter.

As she tried to stifle a sob, tears uncontrollably streamed down Samantha's face.

Alex's heart was breaking. She tried to will Samantha to listen to her thoughts. *Come on, Samantha, you can hear me; I know you can.* She thought harder as she began to stand.

"Sit down, you," Don ordered.

"I need to use the ladies room," Alex countered in a banal tone.

"You're the farthest thing from a lady I've ever seen," the man spat.

She raised an eyebrow and sapphire eyes focused intently on the man before her. She had hoped he would respond in that fashion so that she could continue a conversation and perhaps get somewhat closer to Samantha. Nodding, she continued in the same quiet voice, "At any rate, I would like permission to relieve myself; you can follow if you want to make sure that's where I'm going." *Samantha, listen to me!*

"Do you think I'm crazy? I follow you and the rest of these people call the police. Sit down."

She was now within arm's length of her lover and sitting down was not an option. *Samantha, we've been here before, do your thing!*

"I get *faint* when my bladder gets stressed," she pleaded, looking at Don and then glancing quickly in Samantha's direction, hoping the blonde would take the hint.

Comprehension dawned in the smaller woman's eyes as she observed the interaction between her father and her lover. The corners of her mouth turned up in a slight smile, and she winked at Alex to let her know her thoughts had been received.

Seconds later Don was fumbling with Samantha's limp body as she collapsed into a dead weight on his arm. Although he tried his best, he lost his balance, unable to keep his daughter from falling to the floor. In that split second, Alex used the chance to knock the gun from his hand.

Samantha crumpled to the floor as the tall brunette grabbed Don's flailing arm and twisted it behind his back. "Sorry, Samantha," she apologized, looking down, "I can only grab one person at a time; I figured he was more important to have under control."

Rubbing her buttocks, Samantha grinned broadly while accepting Kelley's outstretched hand. "Apology accepted."

Ear piercing threats rang through the room. "Let me go, you dyke bitch! You ruined me! You ruined my life! I'm gonna ruin you!" Don was howling, his body twisting and turning, trying to release himself from Alex's grip.

"Shut up, or I'll shut you up," the lanky brunette threatened, tightening the pressure of her hold on him.

He screamed again, and Kelley made a move to assist her daughter in holding the flailing man still.

"Don't make me mad, Don!" Alex threatened. "You won't like me when I'm mad."

One look into ice blue eyes and the beaten man crumpled to the floor.

"Should we call the police?" Sally asked. The young woman now stood behind her sobbing mother, her hands on Sheila's shoulders.

"Goddess, no!" Aurora answered. "The last thing we need is for the police to be involved."

"She's right," Kelley agreed. "He doesn't need to be jailed, and we don't need the sensationalism."

"Kelley, would you get me something to . . ." Alex began.

"Yeah, rope, be right back." Kelley nodded and raced from the room.

Aurora continued the conversation her lover had started. "We have a good friend who operates a mental clinic not far from here. It's a private clinic; admissions are handled in a hush-hush manner. I think getting your husband to a psychiatrist is of the utmost importance."

"I agree," Sheila stated, wiping tears from her face. "Thank you, Aurora."

"No thanking needed, that's what family is all about." Aurora enveloped the distraught woman into a comforting embrace.

Don's face animated again at the mention of a mental hospital. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Sobbing uncontrollably, he pleaded with his wife not to institutionalize him. "How could you even think of doing that to me, Sheila?" he wept. "Haven't I been a good husband . . . a good father? I've taken care of you and the girls the best I knew how . . ."

"I'm sorry, Don . . ."

In the space of a breath, his mannerisms changed. "Sorry? You just try to get me committed! You go ahead and try. Do you think anyone will listen to you, and the residents of this house of abominations?" He laughed hysterically. "Not on your life. No one will listen to you! You'll learn what being sorry is all about, you no-good c-u-n . . ."

"I really **hate** that word, Don," Alex snarled at him as he tried to get up off the floor. "I've had about all of your mouth I can stand, and if I'm not mistaken, I told you to be quiet." She bopped him on the back of the head. "If you don't start behaving, I'll have to gag you."

Like a limp rag doll, the desperate man collapsed back into a heap at Alex's feet. He remained in the same position until the ambulance arrived some thirty minutes later. Within minutes of its arrival, Don was sedated and was soon in a drug-induced sleep.

A tearful Sheila felt obligated to ride in the back of the ambulance, and Sally felt compelled to accompany her. The rest of the group followed in Kelley's van.

Dr. Yonderson met them at the sanitarium and informed the family that Don would not be evaluated until sometime in the morning when the medications wore off. In the meantime, there were papers to be completed, and the doctor had a short session with Sheila, Samantha, and Sally to get some idea what might have caused Don Riley's psychotic break.

Her final advice of the evening to the three bewildered women was for them to stop worrying, go home, and try to get some rest. Anxiety was a useless emotion, she explained, and Don would be fine until morning. They needed to tend to themselves.

The ride back to the villa was a quiet one. Everyone seemed lost in thought.

Finally, Sheila broke the silence. "I can't leave him now," she mumbled.

"What?" Samantha queried.

"Your father, Sammie-I can't leave him now."

"But Mom-"

"No buts. It wouldn't be right to abandon him when he is in such dire need of support." She turned to her daughters. "Your father is a very sick man. Heaven only knows how long he has been ill. I can't desert him now." She put her face in her hands and began to weep.

"It's okay, Mom," Samantha consoled. "You don't have to make any major decisions just yet."

"Yeah," Sally agreed. "We need to wait and see what the doctor has to say after her evaluation in the morning."

Aurora turned around to face the back of the vehicle. "You and Sally are welcome to stay at the villa for as long as you need."

"Absolutely," Kelley seconded.

Samantha gave her in-laws a thankful look as her mother continued to quietly sob into her hands.

The six women stepped back into the dining room where just hours ago they had been laughing and celebrating the Thanksgiving holiday. A group sigh was audible, and all six of the participants grinned when they realized what they had done. Looking at the mess they had come back to made Aurora wish she hadn't sent the hired help home. She looked at the expressions on the faces of her family and began laughing. Everyone looked at her like they might have to take another trip to the mental facility.

"Well, this mess should take our minds off just about anything!" she exclaimed. "Did you ever see such a clutter?"

"Sure," Kelley answered, "after any party you throw, my Sweet. The only difference is that you always have someone else around to clean it up. Tonight you get to help with the chore."

Now it was everyone else's turn to giggle. Kelley raised an eyebrow and pointed at the table. In response, a multitude of hands quickly grabbed and stacked dirty dishes to be taken into the kitchen.

A semblance of order in the ranks didn't take long to emerge. Alex and Kelley carted stuff from the dining room to the kitchen. Aurora and Sally put perishables up in containers to store in the refrigerator, and Sheila and Samantha scraped, rinsed, and loaded the dishes into the dishwasher. Before long the entire job was concluded.

"How about a nightcap?" Kelley proposed. "I think we could all use one."

The offer was gratefully accepted, and everyone decided to bring the evening to an end out in the late night air, sitting around the pool.

"It's hard to believe that a day that began so beautifully could end like this," Sally moaned.

"I don't know," Samantha replied. "It could have been worse. He could have hurt one of us."

"Or himself," Sheila added.

"At least now he'll get the medical attention it's obvious he desperately needs." Samantha concluded.

"Yes, he will," Aurora agreed. "Now, before there are more people in this family in need of medical attention, I suggest we all call it a night and be thankful for the end of this Thanksgiving."

Before the women separated and proceeded to their rooms, there were hugs all around.

Alex and Samantha walked with Sheila and Sally to their room and bid them goodnight. Sheila thanked Alex for being so quick to recover the pistol Don had held on Samantha.

"It was instinct, Sheila. I wasn't going to let Samantha get hurt," Alex assured the older woman.

"No, she's definitely my Champion, Mom," Samantha interjected with a slight grin. She kissed her mother goodnight and told her to try to get some rest.

"She will," Sally said. "We both will. You two do the same."

"Absolutely," Alex countered, putting her arm around Samantha and leading her back toward their bedroom. "We'll see you in the morning. I'm sure everything will work out fine."

Snuggled in her lover's warm embrace, Samantha let out a deep sigh.

"What was that for?" Alex asked.

"I guess it's the first relaxed breath I've taken since opening the front door and seeing Dad standing there. Everything had been going beautifully before then."

"And everything will return to normal before you know it, Samantha. At least now your father will get some help."

She reached down and tilted the smaller woman's chin to enable her to look into misty green eyes. "Come on, Samantha, there's been enough of that tonight."

"I know," the blonde sobbed quietly as unbidden tears escaped and trickled down her cheek. "I just have the feeling that I was the cause of this mess with Dad."

A hint of ice crept into the Alex's voice. "That is the most ridiculous statement I think I've heard come out of your mouth. When you say something like that, you're saying that all your problems began the day you met me! If it wasn't for my interference your father would still have a viable position at his firm and-"

"Whoa! Alex." Samantha sat upright and faced her lover. "If you want to call a statement ridiculous, I think maybe you had best listen to yourself. That's not what I meant at all." Green eyes became daggers shooting in the direction of Alex. "I guess I meant if I had taken it a little slower, eased him into my new life-"

"Nothing you could have done would have made any difference, Samantha. Don't you know that?" Alex's anger eased and she took the smaller woman into her arms.

"Listen, Samantha, you need to look at this logically. Your father's been in trouble emotionally for a long time. Maybe your coming out and my getting involved helped to bring his condition to the foreground, but it would have gotten there with or without this present situation. Something else would have been the catalyst, and perhaps that would have taken a load of guilt off your mind, but blaming yourself for what happened tonight is ludicrous."

The blonde let Alex hold her and allowed the comfort of her partner's words and embrace to gently push aside the blame she had been convincing herself all evening she somehow deserved.

"I hate to say this when he's so vulnerable, Samantha," Alex added in a hushed tone, "but blaming yourself is just what your father would have wanted in his sickened state. It was his intention to make victims of all the women in your family. Maybe he'll come out of this crisis a better person. Just maybe he'll start appreciating the marvelous people he's had the privilege of calling family for so many years."

Samantha could find no words to contradict what had just been spoken; instead, she snuggled back down into her sleeping position, resting her head on Alex's shoulder. She felt safe and loved in Alex's arms, and the hairs all along her neck and back stood at attention when long, thin fingers ran through her hair.

Considering everything she had experienced, this was still a day of thanksgiving. Before saying a prayer for her parents, Samantha closed her eyes and thanked the powers that be for allowing Alex to come into her life.

"I still think this is a day to be thankful, Alex," Samantha murmured into Alex's chest. "I have been blessed with many things in my life-especially for the twist of fate that led me to you." She squeezed Alex around the waist and kissed her gently.

"Any day that ends up with me holding you in my arms is a day of thanksgiving. Now it's really time to be getting some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a unique experience, something I've come to learn to love about being with you."

The smaller woman easily found the spot where Alex could not help but giggle and let her

fingers do her speaking.

"Okay, I give up," Alex said, still giggling. "Let's call it a truce and get some shut-eye, okay?"

"Okay, Alex," Samantha agreed. "Once again, sweet dreams."

"Sweet dreams, Samantha. May the challenge that tomorrow brings be pleasant, and if not pleasant, then at least tolerable. As long as we have each other, we can overcome even the most traumatic situation; I have faith in that." She lovingly kissed Samantha's head and gave her a slight squeeze.

Within minutes their cadenced breathing was all that could be heard in the room, aside from the muffled ticking of the alarm clock on the nightstand.

The End of Chapter 4

Chapter 5.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ California Gold ~

by Carole Giorgio

All disclaimers may be found in Chapter 1

Feedback/Comments to WomynBard@aol.com.

Chapter 5

The next couple of weeks were an emotional roller coaster ride for everyone involved. Sheila, Sally, and Samantha remained at Cielo en Tierra during Don's evaluation. He was given a battery of tests, followed by initiation of treatment, and a subsequent search for a facility in Washington State where he could be transferred once his diagnosis was confirmed. Alex remained at her parents' house only over the weekend, before being called back to Laguna to take care of a complicated business matter at Alternative Paradise.

Samantha's first reaction was to go home with Alex. She whined that she felt like a third wheel staying around the house in La Jolla. And she felt like an outcast because when visiting privileges were resumed, she was the only family member the doctor excluded. Sheila and Sally had been asked to stay away for the first few days because of Don's agitated state of mind, but when he had inquired as to where his wife and younger daughter were, the doctor felt a visit might have a positive influence on him.

Alex felt sorry for Samantha, as did everyone at the villa, but she told her it was important for her to stay as support for her mom and sister.

With tears in her eyes and a lump in her throat, Samantha had agreed.

Alex hated leaving alone, but she kept telling herself it was important for Samantha to remain in La Jolla. As much as she had wanted to agree with the blonde's first decision to go home with her, she knew if she had said yes, it would have been out of selfishness and not at all for the greater good. Alex and Samantha had not been separated since they had become a couple, and the experience was not a pleasant one for either of them.

In Alex's absence, Samantha had taken to sleeping with one of brunette's tee shirts. She had taken the shirt out of the hamper after Alex left for Laguna and draped it over her lover's pillow. The shirt was permeated with the scent of Obsession, mingled with the essence of Alex, and it brought Samantha comfort. Although it was no substitute for the real thing, it made falling asleep in the large empty bed a little easier.

Most of the daytime hours found the blonde occupied with busy work, but when evening arrived and the sun began its descent into the ocean, Samantha's heart felt empty. At sunset she would walk out onto the patio with the portable phone in hand to await the nightly ritual call from her lover. Alex was never late, and Samantha always answered on the first ring.

What was in actuality only two weeks was, in Samantha's mind, an eternity. November had quickly become December. Carols were intermittently being played on the radio, Christmas lights decorated the trees, and buildings of downtown La Jolla, and the attitudes of people toward one another all seemed to change overnight, as the season of giving arrived.

Aurora insisted on getting the younger woman out of the house during the day and into the spirit of the season.

"Come on," the older woman chided, "this is the best time to search for Alex's presents. She won't be trying to snoop over your shoulder."

Samantha shook off her melancholy mood and managed to convincingly show some interest in shopping.

Her greatest motivation was in knowing that Alex would be driving down for the weekend. Don was being released from the facility and flown to a sanitarium in Washington not far from the Riley home. The doctor had informed Sheila that she anticipated Don would be well enough to go home by New Year's day, but that she held no hope for his leaving the new facility before then. She wanted to make sure that he could cope with the stress of everyday life before pushing him back into society. With Samantha's Washington family going home, she would be going home, also.

The day before her father was to be released from the facility, Samantha had a long discussion with the doctor. Unfortunately, what Samantha wanted to hear and what the doctor had to say

were two different things.

"I'm concerned, Samantha, that you seeing Don at this point in his recovery would be more detrimental than beneficial."

There were tears in Samantha's eyes as she continued to listen to the physician.

"I know this is a difficult time for you, but I have to put your father's condition first. I feel quite confident that he'll be ready to visit with you around the first of the year."

"The first of the year?" Samantha gasped.

"Samantha," Dr. Yonderson continued, as she put a sympathetic arm around the smaller woman's shoulders, "from what you've told me already, your father hasn't spoken civilly to you since the day he discovered your sexual preference."

Samantha nodded her head and stifled a sob. "I just thought that now, maybe things would be different between the two of us."

"They very well could be, Samantha, but you have to give your father time to heal. On the other hand, he may never accept your lifestyle, and that's a fact that you may have to live with." She pulled the blonde close and gave her a motherly hug. "What is to be, will be, Samantha. You have to believe that everything happens as it should, even when we can't see the reasoning behind it."

Again, Samantha nodded. "I know that, doctor. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me."

"No problem, Samantha, that's my job." Dr. Yonderson smiled and started to say something else when her beeper interrupted the conversation. She read the message and shook her head. "Gotta run, hon. Tell Aurora and Kelley I said hi, will you?"

"Most definitely." Samantha promised. Her final "thank you" was lost to the air as the physician made her way quickly down the corridor toward the double doors.

Friday finally arrived and Alex along with it, just in time to say goodbye to Sally and Sheila. Don was being transported via a van from the facility to the Cessna owned by the Dorian's. Since Aurora was beginning a book tour during the Christmas season and kicking it off in Seattle, she and Kelley had volunteered to fly the Riley's, sans Samantha, home. It seemed the most expedient way to get Don to the new facility. Plans had been formulated to have Don and an attendant meet them at the plane in San Diego. He would be heavily sedated, and the doctor had promised no problems. The male nurse would be responsible for him, and there was to be a van from the sanitarium waiting to pick them up at the airport when they landed in Seattle.

Alex carried on a short hello/goodbye conversation with Sheila and Sally and stood talking with

her parents, while Samantha said her final good-byes to her mother and sister.

"She seems to be handling their leaving pretty good," Alex observed, and Kelley agreed with her.

Sheila promised Samantha that they would call as soon as they arrived home but reminded her to give them time to get Don settled in at the new facility. "I'm sorry this has been so hard on you, honey. I'm sure when Daddy is more himself, things will be different between the two of you." She kissed her daughter and pulled her into a frantic hug. "Things will get better, Sammie, they have to."

"I'm sure they will, Mom," Samantha parroted, trying to sound convincing. She hugged her mother back and then turned to Sally. "Take care of yourself and Mom for me, okay?" she pleaded as tears filled her eyes.

"Absolutely, Sammie, absolutely," Sally vowed, wiping a tear from her sister's face and then giving her a warm embrace and kiss goodbye. She turned to the tall brunette standing slightly in the background. "You take care of my big sis, Alex," she grinned, shaking a finger at her sister-in-law. "Don't make me have to come back here and get you."

"Yeah, right, half-pint junior," Alex retorted. "You and whose army?" One giant step and she was standing next to her lover, a long slender arm draped easily over the smaller woman's shoulders. "Not to worry, little sis. She's in good hands." Alex kissed Samantha on the crown of her head and pulled her close. She gave a final plea to the departing relatives. "You all have a safe journey, and don't forget that phone call. Knowing your sister, we won't have a moment's rest until we hear from you."

Samantha leaned into the front seat of the car and said goodbye to Aurora. She thanked her for being so nice to her family.

Aurora kissed Samantha on the cheek and whispered in her ear that they were part of her family, too, now that she had a second daughter. "I left your Christmas presents in the library. I hate that this tour is taking us away during the holiday season, but I know you and Alex will be able to keep each other occupied." A sly grin spread over Aurora's face. "No opening any of the gifts until Christmas Eve. Promise me, Samantha."

"I promise," Samantha assured her mom-in-law.

"I can't trust Alex to do the same," the older woman confided, "so the burden falls on your shoulders." She smiled again and squeezed Samantha's hand. "We'll be in touch, hon. Take care of yourself and that renegade of mine."

"I promise that, too, Mom. Be safe."

Final farewells were said all around, and the lovers watched in silence as the car went down the driveway and out of site. Samantha continued to wave even after she knew no one in the vehicle could see her.

When she thought they had stood alone long enough, Alex spun Samantha around and pulled the smaller woman into an amorous embrace. "Do you know how I've missed this?" Not waiting for an answer, she bent down and gently nuzzled Samantha's ear. Soft, moist lips sent chills of anticipation up and down the smaller woman's spine. Alex held her close and whispered, "Seems like we have the entire villa to ourselves. Kelley sent everyone home early. Could I interest you in some afternoon delight?"

Samantha could feel her knees weakening.

Without waiting for an answer, Alex abruptly picked the blonde up and strolled toward the front door.

Small arms encircled Alex's neck. "I can tell you've been exercising these past couple of weeks," she giggled.

"Nothing else to do with you so far away," the tall beauty confessed.

Inside the door Samantha began to squirm in her lover's arms. "I've got to be getting heavy; I can walk from here," she stated, still giggling.

"Only if you promise not to walk anywhere out of my sight."

"Absolutely!" Samantha retorted.

"So, did Mom feed you today?" Alex wanted to know.

"Actually, we all grabbed a bagel on the run for breakfast. I was busy helping my mom and Sally finish getting everything packed, Kelley was deep in conversation with Esmerelda about what needed to be done while they're gone, and Aurora had a conference call with her publisher. Lunch was kind of a catch as catch can, some tuna salad, chips, stuff like that. We were hoping you might have been here by then."

"Yeah, well, a few last minute calls came in as I was about to leave. You know how hectic it is to get out of the Center some days. But it sounds like this place was also buzzing this morning." The dark-haired woman looked around at the deserted foyer. Two shapely eyebrows lifted in unison. "Hmm, it doesn't seem so busy now. I suppose the question is, are you hungry?"

"Are we talking about real food," Samantha asked, putting her arms around her lover's waist.

"Ah, real food as opposed to?"

"Something that will satisfy my soul and my hunger for a certain six foot stretch of beautiful brunette or something that will fill my stomach."

"I suppose, Samantha, that is entirely up to you?"

"You know I hate choosing between things I love." The blonde buried her head in her lover's chest. "What do you want?" she asked tilting her neck back and looking into baby blues she had been without seeing for what seemed like eternity.

"Since it seems like I'm going to be making this decision, I pick the **non**vegetarian meal followed by something divinely decadent that we have delivered so we don't have to leave the Villa or cook tonight." She looked down and kissed the tip of Samantha's nose.

"Hmm, nonvegetarian. Can't say I've ever been described as that, but I definitely resemble that remark." She giggled and held Alex closer. "What did you have in mind for the second course?"

"I don't know; it's a toss up between Mexican or French."

The smaller woman broke into a laugh, "Yeah that's a real toss up. That's almost like saying do you take your lunch or walk to school."

"Huh?"

"Alex those two cuisines are as far apart from each other as fast food and gourmet."

"And your point is?"

Samantha heaved a huge sigh and shook her head. "I guess I have no point, but if it's decadent you're looking for, I say we go with French."

"There, that decision wasn't all that difficult, was it?" Now it was Alex who was chuckling as she kissed Samantha on the cheek. "What do you say we order the food, go take a bath, eat, and then retire to the luxury of a nice comfortable bed?"

"I'd say that sounds like a marvelous way to spend the rest of the day and night."

"Good, then you go start the bath, and I'll order. I'll tell them not to hurry." Alex picked up the phone and started to order, while Samantha headed toward the bathroom.

"Bonjour, mon nom est Alexis Dorian. Je voudrais commander le dîner pour être livré à ma maison . . ."

Samantha stopped dead in her tracks to listen, as Alex gave her name, address, and phone number and then proceeded to order the entire meal in French.

"Je voudrais deux commandes de votre bouillabaisse, un morceau de Tiramisu, un pain Français, et deux éclairs au chocolat, s'il vous plaît."

The brunette motioned for Samantha to continue to the bath while she finalized the order.

But Samantha stood riveted to the spot where she had stopped until she heard the final, 'Merci et au revoir.' She then exited the living room and ran to the bathroom to start filling the tub.

Minutes later when they were both naked and up to their necks in fragrant bubbles, Samantha floated closer to Alex. "I understood about four words of what you said on the phone. Let's see; we're having bouillabaisse, Tiramisu, and chocolate eclairs. You also said 'thank you and goodbye.'"

"Very good," Alex chuckled. "We're also getting some French bread, and they won't be arriving for about an hour to an hour-and-a-half. Plenty of time to relax and bathe."

"Yeah, and get even hornier than we already are," Samantha added.

"I guarantee that will be taken care of after your stomach is full." She pulled the smaller woman onto her lap and put her head back on the rest.

"I'm sure the people who answered the phone speak English, Ms. showoff; why the French?"

"Oh, I just like to exercise my languages when I get the chance. You know; if you don't use it you lose it. But getting back to the present, it seems like an eternity since we've done this," She nuzzled her face closer to Samantha's. "I hated being separated from you, Samantha."

Samantha put her head on Alex's chest and sighed. "We'll make up for the lost time; I'm sure of it. I want to thank you for talking me into staying here, Alex. I would have felt guilty leaving Mom and Sally here by themselves. Sometimes I felt that I was no more than a sounding board when they came home at night, a place to bounce off all the new information they had learned throughout the day about Dad's illness. But at other times I felt that Mom really needed me here to help her through the first couple weeks as she went from anger, to pity, to acknowledgement that most of his violent actions had not been voluntary."

The two women sat and reflected on the weeks just past, never getting out of touch with each other's bodies as they talked, as though they were afraid if they stopped touching the spell of reunion would be broken. The warmth of the churning water soothed and mesmerized the lovers when vocal proclamations turned to inward thoughts, and each of the women became lost in the comfort of the other's arms.

Alex had leaned her body back and placed her head on the tub pillow. Samantha sat on Alex's lap, her head resting on the brunette's chest.

Suddenly, a loud buzzing sound rang through the villa. Alex jumped, startled. "Damn, Samantha, where'd the time go? " She climbed out of the tub and grabbed a robe from behind the door.

"That's our dinner. Wanna meet me in the dining room?" she asked exiting the room.

"Sure," Samantha answered as she began to rise from the still bubbling liquid. She looked down at her fingers and laughed. *Talk about prunin'; I look to be about eighty years old.*

Minutes later they met again in the dining room where Alex had already begun to set out the feast that had just been delivered.

"That smells wonderful, Alex."

"It tastes as good as it smells," the brunette commented.

"Want me to get the wine?" Samantha asked.

"No. Why don't you get out the dishes, and I'll get the wine?"

"Okay," the blonde agreed.

Talk throughout the meal was minimal, except for the occasional mumble of pleasure coming from Samantha commenting on the deliciousness of the food. Neither of the women had realized how hungry they were, and the meal disappeared in a short period of time. Once again the two lovers found themselves lost in an atmosphere of quietude, this time brought about by the feeling of full stomachs.

They sipped leisurely on a second glass of wine. "You know, I think this is the first time I've ever heard this house so quiet," Samantha stated, tilting her head to acknowledge the silence.

"We could rectify that by calling some friends over for a party," Alex offered with a sly grin.

"Not on your life," Samantha countered, leaving her chair and making herself comfortable on Alex's lap. "I have other plans for you this evening tall, dark, and beautiful," she whispered into Alex's ear.

"In that case, shall we retire to more comfortable surroundings?" Alex queried.

"Absolutely."

With her arm around Samantha's shoulders, Alex maneuvered the two of them over to the stereo. She shuffled through some CD's, placed a few in the disc holder, turned the machine on, and then engaged the intercom. The lover's were serenaded by soft saxophone music that followed them from room to room as they continued to their final destination.

It was early evening and the pink, purple, and blue of the sunset was filtering through the room, drenching it in an atmosphere of warmth.

They stood by the window looking out at the ocean.

"Last night when I stood here at this time waiting for your phone call, I cried at the beauty of the sunset and the emptiness I felt without you here by my side." Samantha tilted her head to rest on Alex's body. "Tonight the same scene brings me such inner peace."

"I know exactly how you feel, Samantha. I was looking at our view every night when I called you and felt the same pang of loneliness. But we're both here now." Her fingers ached to touch the soft skin beneath the lavender robe. Her hands went down to the sash that was loosely tied and untied it. Slipping her hands inside the robe, she caressed the smooth curve of her lover's back, pulling Samantha's body closer and burying her face in flaxen hair. "I love you, Samantha," she whispered. She brought her hands up the front of her lover's body to the small shoulders, and then in one swift motion caused the robe to drop to the carpet below.

Alex grinned as ripples of love bumps appeared on the body before her.

Samantha returned the smile and untied Alex's belt, as she, in like fashion, freed the brunette of her bathrobe.

In silence they stood in the shadows of a darkening sky, enjoying the closeness that had been missing from their lives the past couple of weeks. Small fingers began to trace abstract circles around the taller woman's back but were soon halted as longer fingers reached around and intertwined with them. In the choreography of a practiced dance, the two women effortlessly found their way to the large bed.

"I never thought I could miss one person so much in such a short span of time," Alex confessed, barely breathing the words into her lover's ear. Stretched out naked on the long bed, her muscular form dwarfed that of her partner. "Pent up energy and emotion can be a dangerous duo, my love," she muttered.

In an easy succession she straddled the smaller woman and then sat up to look down into an angelic face halloed in the light of a newly risen moon. "You're more beautiful every time I look at you."

Samantha smiled and reached up. "Talk like that will get you absolutely anything you desire," she whispered. She pulled Alex down on top of her and showered her face with kisses. "There are so many things I want to do with and to you, but the most important at this very minute is just to feel you close to me." A small tear filtered out of the corner of Samantha's eye and was quickly kissed away by an observant mouth.

"I'm the eater of tears," Alex acknowledged. "Please tell me, my lady, that those were tears of joy I just consumed. If not, I shall spend the rest of the evening in agony from consuming tears of sorrow."

Samantha giggled. "Definitely tears of joy, my Princess Charming," she affirmed. Remaining tears slipped back into the recesses of malachite eyes, leaving only looks of love and joy, which she graciously showered on the woman she adored.

Taking their time to reacquaint themselves with each other's body, the lovers were in no hurry to bring their act of love to fruition. What began with fervent overtones was soon abandoned to the realm of belly laughs, and the lovers took advantage of time to enjoy one another.

Samantha was still tittering from the tickle attack when Alex's demeanor turned serious.
"Goddess, I missed you these past weeks, and . . ."

Luscious lips prevented the conclusion of the thought to be vocalized, as Samantha smothered Alex with affection. The blonde quickly shifted her position, and Alex found herself looking up into brilliant verdant eyes instead of looking down. Samantha was now fervently occupied with the task of covering Alex's face and neck with baby kisses. At the same time, her hands became otherwise engaged in caressing the strong, shapely body that now lay beneath her.

Dinner might have still been digesting in her stomach, but she was filled with a thirst that only consuming her soulmate would quench. Samantha slowly slid her body down the muscular one that lay under her, leaving a trail of kisses from Alex's neck, to her firm breasts, and then continuing on to the mound of Aphrodite, where she paused for a moment to look up at the expression on her partner's face.

A whimper from deep within Alex's throat caused Samantha to hesitate and search her lover's face. She reached up and with a gentle massaging motion took one firm breast in each hand. This action elicited additional ecstatic murmuring from the brunette. Content that everything was going according to her plan, Samantha buried her face in the dark curls before her. The skin on her back tingled as Alex, simultaneously, reciprocated by running adept fingers through golden locks. Alex's anticipation was rewarded when the Samantha's tongue found it's small, pulsing target, and moans of pleasure emanated from both participants.

The ritual of love continued until heat from their glistening bodies perfumed the room with scents of Obsession and Shalimar mingled with the aroma of love. Although trying to make up for two lost weeks was a challenge, it had been a pleasant task that neither of them had any complaint with. They were both sated and exhausted, and the empty feeling each of them had been carrying around during their separation had joyously been replaced with one of wholeness.

Somewhere between sleep and dawn, Sally called to let Samantha and Alex know that she and Sheila had arrived home safely and that Don was signed into the sanatorium and adjusting nicely to his new environment. Although Samantha had been sleeping before the call, her level of comfort was much greater once she no longer had to worry as to the welfare of her Washington family.

When the morning sun began to streak through the windows, Alex awoke, but couldn't motivate herself to get out of bed and leave the sleeping Samantha. She was immediately too awake to go back to sleep, but she didn't want to be alone.

"Hey, sleepyhead." She kissed the golden crown at her lips and then pouted when Samantha merely moaned and snuggled closer into her body. "No you don't," Alex teased. "Time for Sleeping Beauty to awaken."

"Aw, Alex," the smaller woman whined. "I was having such a wonderful dream."

"So wake up and tell me about it," Alex coaxed.

"No," Samantha answered, not opening her eyes. "You just want me to talk so I'll wake up and keep you company."

"Absolutely," Alex chuckled and then whispered into Samantha's ear, "I could make waking up worth your while."

"Gosh, you really know how to bribe a girl," Samantha crooned, opening and batting her eyelashes.

"Instant replays are my specialty." Alex continued, slowly tracing circles in the skin at her fingertips. The brunette smiled when she observed the involuntary reaction of love bumps immediately dotting the area beneath her hands. "So, how important is finishing that dream?"

"What dream?" Samantha answered, and she allowed herself to be maneuvered onto her back.

The next hour was spent reconstructing the loving scene from the night before. When both the women were satisfied beyond expectations they lay side by side, staring up at the ceiling, each in her own wonderland of euphoria.

Finally, Alex broke the silence. "So, do you want to stay here for the rest of the weekend or go home?"

"Oh, Alex, let's go home," came the immediate response as the toe-headed woman repositioned herself on one elbow to look into her lover's eyes. "I miss being home."

Alex drew the smaller woman into an embrace. "Home has missed you, too, Samantha. We'll bathe, dress, get the Christmas presents Mom and Kelley left for us, and head for Laguna."

As asleep as she had been minutes before, the vivacious blonde was now similarly awake, off the bed, and headed for the bathroom.

Not more than an hour later, the two women were packed and ready to leave La Jolla.

The trip home was peppered with discussion about the upcoming Christmas party at the Center. They had decided within the past two weeks to have a fully catered affair because they weren't sure how much time and effort Samantha was going to be able to put into preparations. Alex had suggested a company she was familiar with and convinced Samantha that her spending hours coordinating was not crucial to throwing a marvelous party for the employees and their families. Besides, Alex had impishly argued, Samantha needed to spend more time buying **her** Christmas presents.

"You know, Alex, even though we always know exactly when the Christmas season is going to occur, it still seems to sneak up and bite us in the butt."

"Well, I haven't had to worry much about the holiday the past few years. I'd become a bit of a humbug," the brunette confessed. "Kelley will be happy that I've seen fit to get into the spirit again. She loves this time of the year."

"Me, too," Samantha agreed. "I love the way strangers smile at each other and how appreciative people seem to be. It's a shame we can't carry that feeling through the remainder of the year."

"I know, Samantha, but unfortunately, that's human nature. We tend to get so carried away with everyday life that we forget the really important stuff."

"Yeah," Samantha agreed.

The following week Samantha played "catch-up" at work during the day, while the evenings were filled with shopping and decorating. Alex had thrown away most of her Christmas decorations, but she was more than willing to shop with Samantha to acquire new ones.

There was a long discussion as to whether or not to have a real tree. Alex said the artificial trees were just as nice, and they weren't as messy to clean up. Samantha countered with the fact that she loved the smell of a real tree and that the fake trees were outrageously expensive to get one that looked and felt real. Alex smiled and shook her head and reminded Samantha that money was not part of the conversation. Then the tall brunette threw in the argument-breaking statement that with buying an *inorganic* tree they would save at least one real tree. Samantha sighed and gave in. The next shopping trip included a search for the perfect artificial tree.

Samantha was given the pleasure of doing most of the decorating, but she drew the line when it came to decorating the Christmas tree.

"Come on, Alex, get off the couch and come help me with the high places."

"Guess, I can't argue with the fact that you're vertically challenged," the brunette commented as she left her evening paper on the couch. She had to think fast to catch the ornament that was making its way in her direction.

"Vertically challenged! That's hitting below the belt, Alex," Samantha pouted.

"Well? Why do you need me, then."

"Did you ever think maybe because decorating is more fun if you have company?"

"Can't say that I gave it that much thought," Alex teased.

"I'm going to ignore that bit of sarcasm and return to my festive mood." She gave Alex a hug when the taller woman reached the tree. "Ya know, I'd like to start a tradition. What do you think about having one dated ornament added to the tree each year?" She reached down and picked up the special 1999 ornament from its box on the table.

"Sounds like a good way to keep track of anniversaries to me." Alex chided and found herself being flayed with a handful of tinsel.

"Okay, okay. I give up. I'm only kidding." She grabbed Samantha's wrists and drew the smaller woman close to her. "I could never forget our anniversary."

"And what date would you consider our anniversary." There was a twinkle in Samantha's eyes as she watched her lover.

"I would definitely say it was the day I caught and then kissed an angel. That would have to be June 29, 1999."

"And I would have to agree with you," Samantha countered. "I must admit, 1999 has been a very good year for me; I'll love reliving the memories each year when I place this ornament on our tree."

The rest of the evening was spent finishing the decorations on the tree and talking about upcoming holidays.

Samantha kept in close contact with her mother and sister via computer and telephone conversations and was updated daily on the progress her father was making in the sanitarium. His doctor was confident that he would be allowed to visit at home sometime in January. Sheila had asked about his going home for Christmas, but the doctor felt it was too soon. Sheila constantly told Samantha how much Don had changed since the breakdown, but she never mentioned whether or not he spoke of his elder daughter. Samantha decided it was best not to ask to see her father until her mother opened the subject for discussion.

During one of their phone conversations, Samantha told her mother that she wouldn't make it home for Christmas, but promised to visit sometime in January, probably before her dad came home. She wanted to show Alex around without the added stress of dealing with Don or having to sneak around behind his back. This would be the first Christmas Samantha ever spent away from her parents' home. At first she felt it might be difficult for her mother, but Sally assured her everything would be fine. Sally also mentioned to Samantha that both Don and Sheila were going through counseling and working as a team on their marital problems. She felt certain that the divorce proceedings had come to a screeching halt.

With everything going in a positive direction in Washington, the only real disappointment for Samantha during the weeks that lead up to Christmas day turned out to be Sonny and Ray's declined invitation to the office party. Sonny started to explain that their office get together was

being held on the same weekend, but he couldn't bring himself to discuss the situation with Samantha, chickened out, and put Ray on the phone to tell to Alex why they had to choose the same weekend. Samantha reluctantly handed her lover the phone. After Alex cradled the headset, Samantha listened intently while the entire conversation was relayed to her.

Not five minutes later the phone rang. "I am so sorry, sweetness," Sonny whined into the receiver.

"Sonny," Samantha coaxed, "it's okay. I understand; honestly."

"You do?"

"Yes, but you could have told me yourself."

"Not without feeling like a jerk I couldn't," Sonny confessed.

"Listen," Samantha interrupted, "just promise that next year things will be different."

"Absolutely! We'll pick out the dates sometime in the summer. That way we can come down for your party and you can fly up for ours."

"Sounds like a deal to me," the blonde agreed.

When she finished with the conversation, she felt a lot better. Even though she would miss having Sonny around for this year's celebration, she had something to look forward to for next year.

Soon Friday, December 17th, arrived and with it Alternative Paradise's Christmas party. It was a gala affair that encompassed what, again, seemed like all of Laguna. Participants included employees and their families, clients and their families, as well as a number of the physicians, who faithfully continued to send patients to the clinic. The celebration was a huge success, and it was well after midnight before the last good-bye was uttered.

Kelley and Aurora had managed to take a short break from Aurora's book tour to surprise the girls and spend Friday and Saturday with them. Aurora praised Samantha on her social skills at hosting another great party and complimented her daughter-in-law on the decorations that adorned the clinic, the guest quarters, and the penthouse.

Saturday was family time, and the four of them were anxious to open their presents to each other, even if Christmas was still a week away.

Kelley took Samantha aside early in the evening to reiterate how thrilled she was to have her as the newest member of the family. She thanked the younger woman for bringing joy back into her daughter's life and making Christmastime fun once again.

After opening their gifts from Kelley and Aurora, it was official that a date had been set for Alex

and Samantha to have a session with the regressionist. With everything arranged and paid for, there was no way for Alex to change her mind.

Although it would have been nice if they could have stayed, Aurora had an appointment in Las Vegas on the 20th of December, so the visit was cut short. The moms had plans to turn the business trip into a mini-vacation following the interview. Ever the gambler, Aurora was thrilled to be spending Christmas in Vegas. Kelley would have rather been home or spending it with Alex and Samantha, but she knew her lover enjoyed the city that never slept. There were a few new shows taking the place of some of the regular ones during the holiday season, and she wanted to attend them. A short farewell found the two older women on their way to Nevada, leaving the two younger women alone in the penthouse.

Even before Christmas Eve arrived, Samantha found herself experiencing one of the best holiday seasons she could remember. She loved the adventure of sharing the festivities of each new day with Alex. Although it had been difficult to come up with novel gifts for the "woman who has everything," Samantha had thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of finding unique items that the brunette didn't already own. Some were totally off the wall and others down right silly, but Samantha was satisfied with the choices she had made and was anxious to see the look on her lover's face on Christmas morning.

Alex, on the other hand, knew exactly what she wanted to give the love of her life and had been finished with the chore of shopping long before the rush of the winter season.

On the 23rd of December, Alex and Samantha got into a discussion on when would be appropriate for them to open their gifts to each other. They were shocked to discover they had such different ideas as to the traditional time of giving and receiving presents. A lengthy discussion ensued on the subject of Christmas Eve versus Christmas Day. Samantha insisted it wasn't truly Christmas until after midnight. Alex agreed and suggested they open their presents immediately following the twelfth stroke of the chimes. Samantha tried to hold her ground with after dawn on Christmas morning but was defeated when she looked into entreating sapphire eyes.

"Besides," Alex argued continuing her plea after she had already won, "part of my present to you demands that we be finished with our gifts before noon."

"So?"

"So, I know you, Samantha; with a vacation day to sleep in, you probably won't be up before noon."

"Don't be ridiculous," the small blonde countered. "You know how restless I get when I'm excited. We're talking about Christmas morning!"

The smile on Alex's face began to turn to a frown, but she was quickly admonished.

"Listen," Samantha urged. "I'm going to give in and agree to our celebrating on Christmas Eve."

Since we're going to be alone, except for Rainbow, of course," she smiled as she bent down and picked up the small ball of fluff, "we can open gifts anytime after the sunset. How's that for a compromise?"

"It's fabulous, Samantha," Alex gloated. "I can tell you this, you will never regret your decision."

At last the evening they had been waiting so patiently for arrived. It was December 24, 1999-- their very first Christmas Eve had finally arrived. Sunset had left the sky hours ago, and dusk had turned to solid night. To occupy some time before the ritual of opening gifts, they had decided to take a warm, relaxing bath complete with candles and music. The clinic was officially closed, and all employees were on vacation until January 3, 2000. It was still hard to believe that in eight days a new century would be starting.

The base of the tree was piled with opened gifts from friends and relatives and a scattering of unopened packages, which consisted of the gifts the women had gotten for each other.

The gifts Samantha had wrapped for Alex sported a silver metallic paper covered with rainbow Christmas trees. Alex's gifts for Samantha were wrapped in a fantasy paper depicting a mythical scene with winged unicorns flying through the sky, adorned with bridles of red and green with holly berries woven into their flowing manes.

When they could no longer stand looking at the presents, it was decided they would take turns opening them. It was quite obvious at a glance that there were more unicorns under the tree than rainbow trees.

"You added more packages while I was dressing," Samantha whined.

Alex merely smiled.

"Not fair," the blonde protested.

"It simply means you get to open two or three to my one," Alex stated matter-of-factly as she handed her lover a medium sized box.

"This paper's beautiful, Alex."

"It's what's inside that's important, Samantha, not the wrapping."

"I don't know, this looks pretty special to me," Samantha disagreed as she carefully unwrapped the box.

It turned out to be a sweater and pair of warm slacks. Alex quickly handed her two more packages, which also contained another sweater and a lavender parka.

"These outfits are beautiful, Alex, but they're more appropriate for the North Pole than southern California. Are we going to visit Santa?" Samantha giggled.

"Never can tell what the future has in store," Alex answered, avoiding the question and the puzzled look on Samantha's face.

"Are we going skiing?"

Alex continued to ignore the question and reached for another unopened gift.

"No you don't, Alex. It's way beyond time for you to open something," Samantha insisted as she rummaged through the packages to find one earmarked for the brunette. "Here. This one is a good one to start with."

It was an odd shaped package, long and thin. "My guess would be a gold plated ruler." Alex chuckled as she began tear off the paper.

"Very funny," Samantha countered, with an anxious look on her face.

"Okay, I give," Alex shrugged. Out of a leather pouch, she pulled a piece of wood that looked like a slightly concave ruler. "Samantha, honey, what **is** this?"

"It's what the ancient Indians used instead of towels." The smaller woman reached out and took the object out of her lover's hand. "See?" She scraped the wood against her arm in a quick sweeping motion. "It's used for drying . . ."

Alex couldn't keep a sober face. She began laughing. "Okay, I'll bite. Why would I want to dry my body with a stick?"

With an indignant look on her face, Samantha shook her head. "Never mind, I just thought that since everything we went through in Sedona that you of all people--"

"I do, Samantha, I do. This," she took the tool from Samantha's hand, "is a gift that took a lot of . . . of . . . ingenuity, and I do appreciate it--honestly, but Samantha, do you really expect me to dry with it?" She mimicked the motions the blonde had made with the piece of wood and finally got the reaction from Samantha she had been seeking.

"Okay, okay, you win," Samantha giggled. "It's a silly gift. It was just so unusual and seemed to fit in with all we had gone through--no--of course I don't expect you to dry with it. What could I have been thinking?"

"Good! Now that's we've got that one under control, I think it's your turn again."

The large box contained a cocktail dress, purse, and shoes. "Wow, this is beautiful," Samantha exclaimed as she held the dress up in front of her. "You had best have someplace special in mind if you want me to don this." There was an impish twinkle in green eyes as she leaned over and

kissed Alex thank you. "My gifts are going to pale in comparison, Alex. In my family we usually only gave one or two gifts per person."

"Well, you're in **my** family now, my Destiny; time to learn to splurge a little." Alex kissed her on the cheek and handed her the next present--a deep purple jogging suit.

"Okay, now I really hate to have you open my gifts," Samantha said as she admired the new outfit. "But they are all gifts of love, so I won't feel sorry for them."

"Good girl," Alex agreed as she accepted the package Samantha was holding out to her.

The next few presents Alex opened, not counting the three music CDs, were all some form of the yin/yang symbol. There was a vanilla candle, sandstone coasters, an incense burner, and a beautiful watch.

"Can I assume this is a theme Christmas?" Alex asked without a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

Samantha didn't know whether to laugh with her or take offense. "Do you realize how difficult you are to buy for Alexis Dorian?"

The blue eyes sparkled, and Alex drew Samantha close. "I'm only teasing you. I love everything I've opened." She kissed the smaller woman on the crown of the head. "As a matter of fact, I **do** know how difficult I am to buy for, and I think you've done a marvelous job of getting me things that I would never have . . ." She could feel Samantha tensing under her embrace. "No . . . let me put that another way. I'm thrilled with the variety of yin/yang objects you found."

Samantha gave her a questioning look.

"Seriously, Samantha, I can use everything--well, except for the bathing stick," she chuckled. "I love everything, honey, thank you. This is the best Christmas I've had in years."

"Really, Alex? I was so afraid you wouldn't like the gifts. You really need to start a hobby or a collection I can add to."

"I have one."

"You do?"

"Yeah, you."

"Alex, I'm being serious."

"So am I." She gave Samantha an almost shy look, meant only for the woman she loved and handed her another present.

"No," Samantha objected.

"Just this one more," Alex insisted.

"A-l-e-x, you've already outdone yourself."

"Just this **one**," Alex repeated.

Samantha sighed and shook her head, but then smiled and opened the gift. Inside the box was a neatly folded T-shirt. When she pulled it out to look at the design, an envelope dropped into her lap. She continued to inspect the shirt, which had a big red apple with the New York skyline silhouetted in the middle of it and the words "I Love New York" written across the top. Samantha shook her head slightly and squinted her eyes--one eyebrow raised as she mimicked the facial expression she loved to watch appear on Alex's face. "There's more to this gift than meets the eye, isn't there, Alex?"

"Don't know, Samantha, but it looks like you have an envelope to open." The brunette had a crooked grin on her face and a raised eyebrow that mirrored the expression of her lover.

Samantha picked up the envelope and carefully broke the seal. Inside was a certificate that read: This coupon is good for one round-trip plane trip--destination New York City--and one ticket to the Broadway show, *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Samantha threw her arms around Alex and hugged her, before planting baby kisses all around her face. "I don't believe you did this!" She repeated the phrase over and over again. "I get you small, insignificant things like candles, music, and a watch, and you give me a trip to New York City and a night at the theater!"

"Hey," Alex reminded her, "I'm going, too, you know." Her heart swelled at Samantha's reaction to the gifts. She knew there was no better place to take an aspiring author than to a city where words and dreams came to life every night in the theaters on and off-Broadway?

Tears of joy caressed Samantha's face as she tried to gather her composure. "You, my dear, are spoiling the bejeebers out of me."

"That's my prerogative," Alex answered.

"But I do have one more present for you, Alex. It's in your stocking."

"Oh, you do, do you? I didn't even fill a stocking for you."

"Gee, guess you're a loser at gift giving; how could you not fill a stocking?" She smiled and handed the ornately decorated sock to the brunette. "Here. It's not a trip to New York, but it's from my heart."

Alex felt her face flush as she took the stocking from her lover. She rummaged through all the

small stuff the stocking held, opening items such as toothpaste, candy, a bottle of Obsession, a bar of Obsession soap, and some coal stuck at the edge of the toe area.

"You got that for being less than perfect during the year," Samantha had explained, grinning.

Right before she encountered the coal, Alex had extracted a small box wrapped in silver foil paper and tied with a rainbow ribbon but had set it aside. When she finished opening the other items, she picked up the tiny box. "This must be the prized possession you spoke of."

"Could be," Samantha replied in an angelic voice. "But you won't ever know, if you don't open it."

"K," Alex whispered, as she slowly undid the paper and opened the lid. Lying on a bed of lavender velvet was a silver ring. "The piece de resistance," Alex muttered. "Goddess, this is beautiful!"

It was, indeed, the final addition to the theme of the season, and it was spectacular. She lifted the exquisite piece of jewelry out of the box and held it between her fingers to examine it closely. It was a silver-encased yin/yang and was of obviously original design. One side had been cut from light blue aquamarine with an inlaid emerald, while the other side was pale green amazonite accented with a dark blue sapphire. Separating the colors was a mid-line of diamonds that sparkled when the light hit them. The entire orb was centered between two hands, and the area beyond each wrist was engraved. One side displayed the name "Alex" and the other side "Samantha." The words almost met as they continued around the band. The inner section of the ring contained the date 12/25/1999 and the word "Destiny."

Samantha sat and drank in Alex's reaction to her masterpiece.

Not usually at a loss for words, Alex sat for a minute with a lump in her throat. "This is the most beautiful piece of workmanship I've ever seen," she exclaimed, unable to keep the joyful tears from trickling down her face. "Samantha, I don't know what to say."

"Thank you will do just fine," Samantha answered, as she wiped the salty dew from her lover's face. "There's a card that goes with it."

"Of course there is," Alex acknowledged. "You never forget the card. You just want to reduce me to a sappy ball of mush don't you?" She grinned and nodded her head.

"I love mush, and I never share, so no one else will know," the blonde teased and handed Alex the card.

Slender fingers carefully opened the delicate envelope and pulled out the glittering card.

OUR FIRST CHRISTMAS
To me Christmas is always
special

This year that's particularly
true
My heart's overflowing with
gladness
Because now in my life there
is you

I have a new feeling this
Christmas
As each 'me' disappears into
'we'
I'm a part of something
much greater
Than I thought that I ever
could be

So my heart's full of joy this
Christmas
I smile each time I look at
your face
You gave me the gift of
belonging
That I know time will never
erase

My unspoken prayers have
been answered
And my wildest of dreams
have come true
I've found love that many
still search for
I'm so lucky to share it with
you

In the midst of the holiday
season ~
This first Christmas we're
favored to share
I rejoice in the life I'm living
And your love that is
precious and rare.

"Goddess, that's beautiful, Samantha, thank you." Alex gave her a kiss and held her close. "I hate to have to say this right now," she whispered into Samantha's ear, "but we really need to pack before going to bed tonight. Morning's going to come early, and we have a busy day scheduled."

"Most of my packing is sitting here at my feet." Samantha motioned to the clothes scattered around the floor under the tree.

"I would say that's a good start, but . . ."

"I know, Alex; I'm only kidding," Samantha groaned, got up, and took Alex's hands into her own. "Come on. We're off to pack."

"Not before I thank you properly for the beautiful presents," Alex insisted.

"You thank **me**?" Samantha shook her head. "I think I should be the one doing the thanking." She spread her arms and acknowledged the pile of gifts that now belonged to her.

"You told me yourself, it isn't the cost or the amount, but the thought behind the giving, and in that department, I believe we are very equal."

"Guess I can't argue with that," Samantha acquiesced.

A look passed between the two women that bespoke more than words of thanks could ever hope to convey. This holiday season together was their first, but somehow each of them felt that as new as their relationship was in this lifetime, their souls had been bonded through many lives before.

There was a far away look in Samantha's eyes, when she put voice to her thoughts. "I'll bet we've been together dozens of times over the centuries."

"What makes you think we've been through that many lives?"

"We're just too comfortable with each other not to have been. As much as I seem to be the hopeless romantic, Alex, I don't think I ever truly believed in 'love at first sight.' But meeting you made a believer of me."

Alex smiled and shook her head. "Okay, believer, let's get this show on the go. Just pack a few things; we'll shop for warm clothing while we're there."

Together they gathered Samantha's presents from the boxes around the tree and took them into the bedroom. Alex got down the suitcases and vacation packing commenced.

"I still can't believe I'm going to New York City," Samantha mumbled to herself when Alex left the room in search of the camera. "I feel like Cinderella getting ready for the ball."

Chapter 6.

~ California Gold ~

by Carole Giorgio

All disclaimers may be found in Chapter 1

Feedback/Comments to WomynBard@aol.com.

Chapter 6

The remainder of Christmas Eve passed quickly. Samantha made a list of everything she could think of to take on the trip, and Alex crossed half of them off. After a bit of bartering, Samantha coaxed Alex into putting a few of them back.

It was almost midnight when the women finally closed the lids on the suitcases for the final time.

"I think we did pretty darn good for such short notice," Samantha boasted.

"Yes, I'm proud of you for trimming down the cargo," Alex chuckled. "You ready for bed?"

"Absolutely! At least my body is, but I'm not sure about my mind. It's still dancing around in my head singing 'Give My Regards to Broadway.' I'm not sure it's going to let me sleep."

"You had best use your powers of persuasion to tame it then because I want you rested when we reach the big city."

"Aye, aye." Samantha gave her mate a mock salute. "I'll do my best," she promised while pulling her nightshirt over her head.

"I've asked Angel to come and check on Rainbow and the building every other day to make sure everything's okay," Alex said as they climbed into bed.

"That's great, Alex. I was going to ask about our little fur-baby. I knew you'd have it all worked out, but I still hate leaving her alone so much. Maybe we should get her a feline or canine companion. Whaddaya think?"

"I think we should go to sleep and talk about that at a much later date."

"Okay, but promise you'll think about it."

"I'll think about it Samantha, but not right now." She repositioned her body to allow the smaller woman to situate herself in the crook of her arm. "There, all snuggled in?"

"Uh huh." Samantha gave the brunette a squeeze. "Merry Christmas, Alex. Thank you for all my

gifts and especially for the trip to New York."

"Merry Christmas to you, too, sweetheart." Alex hugged the smaller woman and kissed her gently on the head. "There aren't enough words to thank you, Samantha, for my ring." She dangled her left hand in front of Samantha's face, and then held it so she could better admire the elegant adornment. "Perhaps you should go into jewelry design instead of writing," she added, while turning out the bedside light.

"Yeah, right! Now I know you're exhausted. Sweet dreams, Alex."

"Sweet dreams, my Destiny."

"I know they will be. I'll be in New York long before we ever set foot on the plane."

"Easy on the dreaming, then; I don't want the real trip to pale in comparison."

"Nothing you ever plan could pale to simply dreaming," Samantha assured her lover.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, but your dreams are anything but simple," Alex chuckled.

"It's been a wonderful evening, more than I could have ever imagined. I know it's only one day . . ."

"One day? Not on your life. Christmas isn't even near being over. I've arranged for the day to extend for the entire time we're in New York. Plus, in real time the day has only just begun."

"Wow, first the birthday that wouldn't quit and now Christmas--how lucky can one gal get?"

"I don't think anyone is luckier than I am right now," Alex said.

"I was talking about me!" Samantha countered.

"I know, honey. I think we both made out like bandits this year in more ways than one. But now it's time to get some sleep. You don't want to be groggy in the morning."

"Right you are; no more talking from me."

"Good."

"I'm just so wound up, I don't . . ."

Two long fingers grazed the blonde's lips. "Hush, Samantha."

Samantha hushed and felt the tingle of her lover's fingers as they gently stroked her back, calming the thrill of the moment and allowing her to drift slowly into a more relaxed state. A few minutes later, Alex felt the steady rhythm of her mate's breathing. She softly kissed the golden

crown in front of her and whispered her nightly prayer to the goddess. When she finished, she closed her eyes and joined her soulmate in sleep.

Before the first rays of the new day graced the windows of the penthouse, Alex was awake and out of bed. *Goddess, it's been ages since I've felt this much excitement on Christmas day. She looked at Samantha. Just watching you sleep and anticipating what the day has in store for you intensifies my enthusiasm. Who would've thought that a golden-haired princess would enter my life and release the child in me that I thought I had lost forever?* She chuckled silently and shook her head. *And you call me your champion.*

Even though they had an early plane to catch, Alex decided to give Samantha a few more minutes of rest. There would be no stopping once the day really began. The brunette was no stranger to holiday travel, but this trip was different; she wasn't going solo.

Not being one to waste time, she decided to take the large suitcase downstairs and put it in the car. When Alex picked up the luggage, Rainbow followed her as far as the kitchen, but when the cat realized that her owner was leaving the apartment, she scurried back to join her other human, the one in the soft warm bed.

"Go ahead, Rainbow," Alex chuckled, "Don't let me keep you." The small cat gave the brunette a backward glance and then raced from the room. "That's right, go climb under the covers with Mommy. I should be the one still sleeping there--but you go right ahead." With a flick of her wrist and a smile, she dismissed the small animal and continued on her way downstairs, suitcase in tow.

Upon her return to the penthouse Alex smelled the aroma of toasted bagels.

"Smells like someone other than Rainbow is up," she announced as she came through the apartment door and walked toward the kitchen.

"I couldn't sleep any longer."

"Impatient?"

"You bet!" Samantha greeted her lover with a morning kiss and a fresh cup of tea. "Merry Christmas, Alex."

"Back at ya, Samantha." The tall woman took the shorter into an embrace, and then reached over Samantha's shoulder to pluck a bagel out of the toaster.

"Well, if that isn't romantic," Samantha giggled. "I'm dumped for breakfast bread."

"Not dumped," Alex corrected. "It's just that I've been up for a while and my stomach ruled over my heart."

"I guess I can understand that. What've you been doing?"

"You mean Rainbow didn't tell you?"

"No, she's been quite closed-lipped recently." Samantha looked at the kitten that was now curled in a ball on one of the kitchen chairs.

"In that case, I confess. I had an early morning rendezvous on the beach with . . ."

"Not a good way to start Christmas morning, Alex."

"No? Oh, okay, I took that overstuffed suitcase down to the car. I figured it would be one less thing to carry down on the way out."

"Much better answer, and that was sweet of you."

"Not really. It was just easier than taking everything at once."

"What everything?" Samantha looked puzzled. "We have the one large suitcase, the small carryon, the camera case, and my bag for things to do on the plane . . . hey . . .I'm talking to you. Where are you going?"

Alex had tried to keep eye contact with her lover during the conversation but had been inching slowly out of the room, toward the closet. "Oh, I have something in here that needs to go with us." She fumbled around in the top of the closet for a minute and came back into the kitchen carrying a medium-sized box. "Mom suggested this as a gift a few months back, but I was so wrapped up in trying to make your birthday a success that I completely forgot about it until a week ago." She handed the astounded blonde the brightly wrapped gift.

"Alex, no." Samantha whined. "You said the trip to New York was the last present."

"Sorry--I lied." Alex grinned. "Come on, humor me."

"Humor you? You're like the Energizer bunny, but instead of going and going, you keep giving and giving and giving."

"I resemble that analogy."

"How can I argue with that? Okay, you win." Samantha put the box on the counter and began to open it. Seconds into the unveiling she could read the label on the box. "Oh, Alex! No! This is way too . . ."

"Samantha, just open the present."

"But it's a . . ."

"I already know what it is," Alex chuckled. "Like I said, Mom was the instigator on this one. I was just a little slow on the uptake, or you would have had it for your birthday."

"Gods, Alex!" Beaming from ear to ear, the blonde took out her new laptop computer. "Wow. I don't know what to say."

"Did I hear you correctly?" Alex teased. "Did you just say you were speechless?"

"No, smart butt. I said I don't know what to say. That means besides thank you, which doesn't seem half enough." Tears obscured her vision as she searched for the right words to thank her lover.

Alex stepped closer. Placing her hand under the smaller woman's chin she gently tilted her face toward her own. "Tears are not what I was expecting, Samantha. I was hoping for a smile."

"I am smiling. I'm just having a little difficulty focusing." Samantha threw her arms around Alex's neck and hugged her tightly. Standing on her tiptoes she whispered a "thank you" into her lover's ear.

"You're more than welcome, Samantha." Alex whispered back.

"The traveling case for it is in the closet. You can transfer what you still might need from your busy-stuff bag. We should leave for the airport within the next twenty minutes."

"I'm all packed," Samantha assured the brunette.

"Good. Then as soon as we've cleaned up here and said good-bye to Rainbow we can be on our way."

"Should I be expecting any other surprises?" Samantha asked.

All she received for an answer was a raised eyebrow and sly grin.

"Alex," she protested.

"Finish getting ready, Samantha, we need to hurry."

The ride to the airport was uneventful, and soon the two women were buckled up and settled comfortably on the plane. Samantha insisted that Alex have the window seat. "I'll probably be too busy learning all about my new toy to spend much time looking out the window." She brandished the owner's manual in the air before her. "One of the first things I'm going to do is e-mail your mom a thank-you card."

"She'll love that, sweetheart."

Once they were up in the air, Alex watched the smaller woman explore all the bells and whistles her new toy had to offer. It seemed as though they had barely left the tarmac before the "fasten your seat belt" sign was back on. The pilot announced that they would be landing in a few minutes and Samantha looked up from her new obsession with a questioning expression.

"Did I hear the pilot say San Francisco?"

"Yes."

"We're going to New York via San Francisco?"

"Uh huh."

"I didn't hear the pilot say San Francisco when we left John Wayne."

"You weren't paying any attention to him, you were busy with your computer."

"Hmm. Don't most flights from LA to New York City go east instead of north?"

"Most do, but this one's special; this is the Christmas flight." Alex continued to keep a somber face, but Samantha was quickly catching on.

"We're going to get to see Sonny and Ray, aren't we?" Samantha squealed.

"Absolutely." Alex finally broke into a broad smile. "But we're only going to be able to spend two hours with them. I didn't get a nonstop flight because I thought you and Sonny should be able to see each other on Christmas. I had invited them to meet us in New York, but Ray's Christmas present to Sonny was a trip to Hawaii, so a stopover in San Francisco will have to do."

"Oh, Alex. You did it again." Samantha started to embrace her lover, but stopped mid-motion.

"Hey," Alex whispered. "I don't care who's staring. I deserve the hug."

Not needing a second invitation, the blonde threw her arms around the taller woman's neck.

"Thank you, Alex. What a great surprise."

"I aim to please."

It wasn't difficult to spot Sonny in the crowd as they walked into the gate area. He was the man who couldn't stand still. Alex spotted him bobbing up and down trying to catch the first glimpse of his friends. She smiled and nodded when Sonny's eyes met hers. Expertly she steered Samantha in his direction, and once they spotted each other, she walked toward Ray, who was

standing out of the crowd holding a large decorated bag.

"Merry Christmas, sweetness." Sonny gave Samantha with a hug and kiss.

"Merry Christmas to you," she replied.

Sonny held her close and began to babble. "I'm so glad you two arranged to stop and visit before heading off to New York City. Bet you were surprised! We're leaving for Hawaii a little after your plane takes off. We opened the presents you sent before we left for the airport this morning so we could thank you in person. Didn't you think it odd that we hadn't sent you a present?"

"Sonny, for goodness' sake, let the girl get a word in edgewise," Ray reprimanded as he neared the two friends. "And then give me a chance to say hello."

"Sorry, I'm just so . . ."

"We know," Ray smiled.

Relinquishing his hold on Samantha, Sonny turned to greet Alex while Ray gave Samantha a warm welcome.

"Let's get out of traffic," Ray suggested after his greeting. "We've got a few gifts for you two to open before we run out of time. There's a coffee shop a few gates down."

Because most people were busy catching or meeting planes, the small restaurant was almost void of customers. The four friends sat down in a booth and ordered drinks. Ray reached into the bag of presents and handed one to Samantha and one to Alex.

"You first," Samantha insisted.

Alex started to object, but Ray touched her on the shoulder. "You heard the lady," he said to his old friend.

The brunette gave in and opened the box. The first item she pulled out was a baseball cap with a large royal purple X positioned over an object that looked like an open Frisbee. "Ah, I've seen this thing before," Alex commented. "This is a picture of that weapon what's her name . . ."

"Xena," Sonny offered.

"Yeah, Xena--this looks like her weapon; what did you call it?"

"A chakram," Sonny answered.

"Right again," Alex said as she pulled the next item out of the box. "Okay, a mug with the same design. Let me guess, you've enrolled us in a fan club of some sort?"

"No." Ray answered this time. "I wouldn't do that to you, Alex. But I do have to admit that it was one of Sonny's suggestions." He smiled and pointed to the final object in the box.

Alex held up a black tee shirt with a Xena: Warrior Princess logo covering the entire front of the shirt. "And I'm supposed to wear this where?"

"When you come with us to the convention in Pasadena next year," Sonny chimed in.

"Right," Alex nodded, smiling as she shook her head no. "Thank you guys, these are very interesting gifts." She gave her old friends an incredulous look and then focused on Samantha. "I think it's your turn now."

"I love the color of the X." Samantha declared as she carefully unwrapped the small present in her hands. She lifted out a sterling silver pendant, a replica of the now-familiar chakram. "What did you do, buy out the Xena store?" Samantha asked her friends.

"Not exactly," Sonny answered and placed the last box in the bag on the table. "They were kind of bonuses that went along with this. This is the real present."

Alex waved her hand and insisted that Samantha have the honor of opening it. After carefully unwrapping the final present, Samantha held up a decorated box that contained 12 videotapes, which made up the entire first season of the television show.

"Wow," Samantha exclaimed. "I guess we have no excuse for not knowing all about the show now. What a great gift. Thanks." She sat the tapes on the table and gave each of her friends a hug and kiss.

"Yeah, gee guys, thanks," Alex mumbled. "You know how much I love to sit and watch television."

"Oh, don't be such a party pooper, Alex," Sonny scolded. "What we do know is how much Sammie likes movies and love stories, and that's exactly what this show is all about--love. So, stop scowling--you'll enjoy these, I promise. Xena's pretty good at kicking ass, which is right up your alley." He smiled at his friend. "Besides, the bonus gifts were more for you, and there are more at home. We figured they'd be kind of an after-Christmas present. We'll put all of this and the rest of what's left at the house in a big box and mail it to you as soon as we get back from Hawaii. That way you don't have extra stuff to mess with in New York. "

"Oh, goody," Alex retorted. Then she graced her friend with a genuine smile and thank you. "Seriously, you definitely know what Christmas is all about, my friend." She gave Sonny a big hug. "We're very lucky to have someone like you to fill us in so we don't miss some of the good things in life."

"You don't know how right you are," Sonny teased back as he gave Samantha a wink. "By the way, sweetness, like I said earlier, we opened the presents you and Alex sent. We absolutely adore the Gorham silver!"

"I have to admit that was Alex's suggestion," Samantha confessed. "She said you'd been looking quite some time for a tray like that to go with your tea service."

"Yeah, and I could never get Ray to cough up the money," Sonny added.

"Hey," Ray objected.

"Well . . ."

"Okay," Ray admitted. "He's right. I'm probably happier than Sonny that you bought the piece; now he'll stop bugging me." He looked at each of his friends. "Thanks, and merry Christmas to both of you."

"You're welcome," Alex and Samantha responded in unison.

Ray looked at his watch and frowned. "I hate to be the bearer of ill tidings, but I think it's time Sonny and I walk you two back to the departure gate."

"Come on, sweetness." Sonny grabbed Samantha's arm and pulled her up. "While they argue over who's gonna pay the bill and who's gonna leave the tip, we'll start walking and get a little more chatting in on the way."

At the gate they all gave wishes for a happy holiday and promises to get together soon, before saying their final farewells. Sonny and Ray watched down the corridor until they could no longer see their friends then turned and headed toward their car to deposit the Christmas presents and to retrieve the luggage for their own vacation.

It had been a long day of traveling by the time they reached the Millennium Broadway Hotel.

Samantha observed that the New York City taxi drivers definitely lived up to their reputations. "I almost feel like kissing the ground," she said after their bags had been transferred from the cab to the hotel luggage cart.

"Well, you'd better get used to putting your life in their hands, Samantha," Alex chuckled. "Anywhere we go for the rest of the week, if it's not within walking distance, will be in a taxi."

The subject was quickly forgotten as they approached the front of the hotel. The doorman opened the front door and bid them welcome, Samantha's face lit up and Alex couldn't help but grin. *It's going to be a great week.*

The blonde's eyes explored the elegant lobby, and she commented on the combination of wood and marble that stretched out before them. "This is one of the most beautiful buildings I think I've ever been in." They approached the front desk and Samantha's expression changed to one of

awe when she realized that the night clerk had recognized Alex immediately.

"Good evening, Ms. Dorian." He also gave a slight nod of his head in Samantha's direction. "Welcome to the Millenium Broadway. We trust you had a good flight?"

"Excellent, thank you," Alex replied as she stepped closer to take a better look at the man's nametag, "Ronald."

"Curt will take you to your suite, and if you find yourselves in need of anything, please don't hesitate to call. We hope you have a memorable stay with us." He handed their keys to the bellboy and gave Alex and Samantha a final smile before resuming his duties.

Samantha nudged Alex in the side, "He knew who you were before you reached the desk."

Alex bent down and whispered in Samantha's ear, "I've been here before."

"Really?"

"Yes. A few times with Uncle Al, a couple of times with my parents, and once or twice all on my own--sort of." She winked and gave Samantha a mischievous smile.

"Ah, I see. I don't suppose I'd like to know who the people you came with 'sort of' on your own were?"

"Actually, honey, it was business. You're the first person, other than family, that I've come here with for pleasure."

They reached the suite, and after the bellboy opened the door he placed the luggage on a rack and opened the curtains.

Samantha gasped at the splendor of the view.

While Alex thanked and tipped Curt, Samantha surveyed the room. On the dresser, at the foot of the bed, was a vase filled with red and white roses, and on the table by the window was a large basket of fruit, a box of candy, and two wine goblets. An iced bottle of champagne was in a bucket on a stand beside the table. Samantha turned to face her just as Alex reached the edge of the bed. "I feel like a princess in a fairytale. My first visit to New York is still a marvelous memory, but this . . ." she spread her arms out and spun around. ". . . this is . . ."

"Something you need to get used to," Alex finished her sentence and then took the blonde into her arms. "One day you will take what seems like extravagance for granted."

"I can't imagine that," Samantha said. "But I certainly will have a fun time getting used to it." She gave her lover a squeeze and a peck on the cheek.

Looking over Samantha's shoulder, Alex spotted a large red-and-green envelope situated

between the pillows on the bed. Loosening her embrace on the smaller woman, she held Samantha's hand as she walked to the edge of the bed. "Wonder what that is?"

"Something out of the ordinary, Alex?"

"Absolutely." Upon further examination, she recognized the elaborate script, and she smiled as she retrieved the envelope from the bed.

"Oh, I see--flowers, candy, fruit, and champagne, those are all ordinary items to be found in a hotel suite, but a plain red-and-green envelope, that's something strange."

"Everything but this," she waved the paper in front of Samantha, "is definitely common for a suite of this magnitude. But this is something special, and I think perhaps you should be the one to open it." She handed the still-unopened envelope to Samantha.

It was addressed **To My Girls**.

Samantha read the inscription. "If it was from your moms it would say *our girls*, so my guess would be that this is from Uncle Al."

From the smile on Alex's face, Samantha knew she was correct.

She carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the enclosed card. "Oh look, Alex." She turned the card so her lover could see the front. "He added an *s* to daughter."

"Read it out loud, Samantha."

"Okay." She cleared her throat. "'Merry Christmas to my daughters. Christmas is the time of year to remember those we hold most dear. It wouldn't be Christmas if I didn't say how much you are thought of every day.' Is that sweet or what?"

"It's a very pretty card, but what did he write inside? I know he wrote something inside."

"I'm getting there," Samantha said. "Let's see--'Dear Alex and Sam, Kelley told me you were planning a trip to New York City, and I asked if she knew what nights you were show-bound. If your itinerary hasn't changed since the last time you talked with her, then you should still have Wednesday night open. Please consider it filled. You're invited to join me for dinner that evening, and it just so happens I have three tickets to go see . . .'" Samantha squealed with delight and waved the card at Alex.

"Slow down . . ." Alex laughed and took the card from her lover's waving hand.

"Liza! We're going to go see Liza!" Samantha exclaimed with glee.

Alex glanced at the card and began reading where Samantha had stopped. "' . . . *Minnelli on Minnelli*. I would love the pleasure of your company. Merry Christmas, my lovelies. All my

love, Uncle Al."

"We're going to go see Liza," Samantha repeated as she spun around the room.

"I guess the answer to the invitation is yes?"

"Yes? You think? Absolutely! Oh, Alex, we are going to have such fun this week."

"That was the idea behind coming here."

"But now we don't just get to see one show, we're going to see two!"

"Well . . . that's almost correct," Alex said.

"Almost?"

"Uh huh." The brunette nodded.

"Alex . . ."

"I have another set of tickets that I didn't give you at home. I thought it might be appropriate to give them to you after we arrived in the city. It looks like Uncle Al had the same idea." She walked over to the carryon luggage, opened it, pulled out an envelope and handed it to Samantha.

Not even trying to contain her excitement, the blonde opened the card and burst into song when she saw the title of the musical they were going to attend on Thursday evening. "Be our guest. Be our guest. Put our service to the test. Tie your napkin . . ."

"Okay, okay. I get the message. You like my choice of shows."

"Like it?" Samantha threw her arms around Alex's neck. "*Beauty and the Beast* is one of my favorites. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!" She showered her lover's face with baby kisses.

"If I do say so myself, this vacation is off to an extremely good start. I think this celebration calls for a glass of bubbly."

"Oh, yes, please."

While Alex uncorked the champagne, Samantha switched back and forth between Uncle Al's card and the set of show tickets she held in her hand.

Alex dimmed the lights, placed the now-filled glasses on the table by the window, and motioned for Samantha to join her.

"Right," Samantha said, as she strolled toward her lover. "There's been so much excitement from

the moment we walked into the room that I haven't even had a chance to take a good look out the window."

Far beneath the suite the lights of Broadway flickered on the Great White Way. Neon advertisements flashed chaotic orchestrations of colored lights, while cars left blazing trails of white and red on the streets below. The buildings surrounding the hotel were trimmed in a variety of Christmas decorations, including angels, Santa, elves, and reindeer. The New York skyline was magnificently outlined in red, green, blue, white, and gold. Sparkling lights twinkled rapidly to a multitude of unheard melodies. Signs were abundant that the holiday season was on hand.

Alex put her left arm around the smaller woman's shoulders, and with her right hand pointed in the direction of Times Square. She informed Samantha that they had an excellent view from the room to watch the huge crystal ball drop from the sky on New Year's Eve. She added that if Samantha preferred, they could be at crowd level and mingle among the thousands of people who made the trek to New York City to be part of the celebration.

Continuing to stare out the window Samantha slowly shook her head. "No, Alex. I'd much rather be alone with you at midnight on New Year's Eve, standing here, on top of the world, and watching the ball make its descent. I really don't want to share that special time with a bunch of strangers. Not only will we be experiencing our first New Year's Eve together, we're welcoming in a new millenium. Definitely a moment I want to share with you alone." She leaned back, put her head on the taller woman's chest and sighed.

Alex put her arms around Samantha. "You know, honey, being among the New Year's Eve throng on Times Square is a dream come true for thousands of people and a wish that will never come true for thousands of others. You don't know how much it means to me to hear you say that you would rather be up here with me." She swallowed the lump in her throat and tenderly kissed the golden head before her.

They stood in silence for a few minutes, drinking in the spectacle in front of them.

Alex was the first to break the reverie. "You know, Samantha, the other side of the building has a fantastic view of the theatre district, but I figured for New Year's Eve these rooms were the better choice. Oh, and before I forget to mention it, Rockefeller Center is only about five or six blocks away. So, if you're up to it in the morning, and if you don't mind the cold, viewing the Christmas tree alone is worth the walk. The illuminated trumpeting angels that lead to the plaza, the gigantic toy soldiers, the golden Prometheus that looks down upon the skaters at the rink, and of course, the rink itself are all must-see attractions during the Christmas season. But we can always take a taxi anywhere you want to go."

"You expect me to sleep tonight after talking about all this?" Samantha's eyes were wide with excitement. "This suite is perfect, Alex. I couldn't imagine a better place to spend a New York holiday. And as far as a morning walk is concerned, I don't mind the cold." Samantha chuckled. "Remember, I'm not the one who grew up in southern California." She nuzzled her head into Alex's chest. "Do you think we might have time to go ice skating?"

"Your wish is my command," Alex answered. "Theater times are the only restrictions on the agenda. We have no control over them. Well, those and the time Uncle Al sets for dinner on Wednesday."

Samantha started to speak when the clock on the wall began to softly chime. Alex reached down and lifted the glasses from the table just as the final tone announced the end of December 24th. She handed a glass of champagne to Samantha, who joined the brunette in a toast. "Once again," Alex began, "Merry Christmas, Samantha. Welcome to the Big Apple!"

Chapter 7.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ California Gold ~

by Carole Giorgio

All disclaimers may be found in Chapter 1

Feedback/Comments to WomynBard@aol.com.

Chapter 7

Christmas Day had come and gone, but visions of sugarplums, angels, brightly lit trees, and Broadway lights still danced in Samantha's dreams. She tumbled and tossed throughout the early morning hours and awoke uncharacteristically early. There was the distinct lack of a warm body beside her and when she reached up, she discovered that Alex's pillow was also missing. Bolting upright in bed she glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 8:00. *That means it's actually 5:00 to my body, so what in tarnation am I doing awake, and where is Alex?*

She scooted off the bed and into the bathroom to take care of morning duties before tiptoeing into the living area of the suite.

Alex lay stretched out on the couch with her feet dangling over the edge. She was half covered by a blanket she must have taken out of one of the closets.

The drapes were partially closed, but there was enough light for Samantha to see into her dark angel's sleeping face. It wasn't a sight she got to glimpse often, and she couldn't bring herself to awaken her.

She turned to go into the kitchen, but being unfamiliar with the layout of the room, she banged her shin against the edge of the table and started to fall. A strong hand reached out and grabbed

her, pulling her backward onto the couch.

"Morning, Ms. Klutz," Alex whispered. "The sun hasn't even thought about peeking over the horizon at home and here you are sneaking around a strange room in an even stranger city and bumping into other people's furniture. 'S plain that to me, Lucy."

Samantha giggled and turned over on her stomach, taking her lover's face into her hands. "Did anyone every tell you you do a lousy imitation of Ricky Ricardo?"

"Hey, I thought that was pretty good."

"Okay, no," Samantha insisted, giggling again. "But I will explain to you nevertheless. You left me alone in a strange bed. I guess your being gone woke me up. When I found you, you looked so damned peaceful I didn't want to wake you."

"Didn't want to wake me, huh?"

"Right."

"I thought it was more like you didn't want me to sleep."

"Huh?" The blonde sat up on the side of the couch. "Why would you say something like that?"

It was Alex's turn to chuckle. "I wish I had a camcorder last night. You were tossing and turning and even sometimes singing in your sleep. There was no way I was ever going to get any rest. Coming out here to the couch was self-preservation."

"Oh, Alex, I'm so sorry. You poor thing . . ."

"It's okay, Samantha, honestly." She grabbed a sheet of paper off the coffee table. "Before I fell asleep, I made a list of things we already have scheduled and then added some places we might want to fit in while we're here. Wanna go over it with me?"

"Sure!"

With pen in hand Alex began to recite the activities off the paper. "Today is a get acquainted with New York day. I thought we might start with a carriage ride around Central Park . . ."

"Can we walk through Strawberry Fields?"

"Absolutely, and then maybe stop by the Dakota if you want."

"Sure, and lunch in a New York deli."

"No problem. I'd like Rockefeller Center to be our last stop for the day so you can see the tree all lit up."

"Oh, yes, and watch the ice skaters and maybe even join them."

"Let's see how tired we are after walking around Central Park all morning before committing to ice skating."

"How old did you say you were going to be in February?"

Alex ignored Samantha's giggling. "Let me quickly go over the rest of the week's activities."

"Okay. I'll sit quietly and listen."

"Yeah, right." Alex grinned. "Monday I don't really have anything much planned except for the show in the evening. We could do a little sight-seeing in the morning and afternoon, if you want. Tuesday I thought we might go visit Lady Liberty, and since Uncle Al is in town he might be able to get us some last-minute tickets to the Radio City Music Hall show."

"Oh, wow, that would be . . . oops . . . I said I would just listen," Samantha quickly put a hand up to her mouth.

"Like I really expected you not to say a word, gabby. But to continue, Wednesday early we could go to the Village and Washington Square before meeting Uncle Al for dinner and the show. Thursday is Beauty and Beast day and Friday is New Year's Eve. We have a lot of free time during the day so if there's something in particular you want to do, we should have plenty of opportunity." She put the paper down on the table and looked questioningly at Samantha. "Any comments?"

"Nope."

"Nothing you want to see or do?"

"Nothing you haven't already mentioned, except a little shopping. Oh--wait--on second thought, I'd love to see that famous children's toy store . . . um . . ."

"FAO Schwartz?"

"Yeah."

"Now is certainly a great time to go visiting there, but you had best be ready to be jostled and tossed; it's gonna be crowded."

"I don't care; it would still be fun."

"All right then, I'll add it to the list." Alex jotted on the agenda sheet. "Got it down for Thursday a.m., and since it's on Fifth Avenue we can do some window shopping while we're at it or some real shopping if you've a mind to."

"Alex I'm glad you have some kind of schedule for us to follow, even if it is sketchy. I'd be bouncing us all over the city, especially since I don't know how any of the attractions are related to each other, distance-wise."

"Right now, I think we should get showered."

"Shouldn't we call Uncle Al?"

Alex looked at the clock on the mantle. "Not at this hour. He's a night owl, not an early bird. We'll give him a ring about noon. If he's in New York, and especially during the holiday season, he's more likely to see the sun rise on the sleepless side of morning, if you know what I mean."

"Like, '*Broadway babies don't sleep tight, until the dawn*'?"

"Exactly." Alex grinned at Samantha's rendition of *Lullaby of Broadway*. "I know our bodies haven't gotten used to the time change yet, but since we're up we might as well get dressed and go eat."

"You know, my stomach seems to object when I get it up this early and don't feed it, so I'm kind of agreeing with you." As if on cue, a rumbled emitted from Samantha's belly.

"I get the message," Alex laughed. "So, it's showers, dressed, and breakfast."

"Sounds like a plan."

At 10:00 sharp the two women made their way out of the suite. Samantha had gabbed the entire time they dressed and changed her mind at least five times about where she wanted to go for breakfast and what she wanted to eat. Most of her indecision was Alex's fault. She kept throwing out suggestions, and each time the newest place sounded more interesting than the one before it.

"You know what?" Alex asked as the door opened and they stepped into the lobby.

"No, what?"

"I think that since we're in New York, we ought to have a New York-type breakfast. How about bagels and lox?"

"I'm fine with the bagels, but I've never had lox."

"No better time than the present to try new things: new city, new clothes, and new foods. I know a cute little deli not far from Central Park that serves marvelous bagels with more toppings than even you could sample at one sitting. They have every type of bagel imaginable from pumpernickel, spinach, sourdough, and sun dried tomato to cinnamon raisin, apricot, and

blueberry."

"That sounds perfect," Samantha said.

"They have a large variety of coffees, teas, and fruit drinks, as well. Yeah, I think you might enjoy this place even better than a fancy restaurant. It's very New York."

"Okay, okay, no more discussion, no more choices, I'm convinced."

"Good. "

When they stepped through the front door, Samantha pulled the collar of her parka up around her face to keep out the biting wind.

"I thought you were the one with the winter experience," Alex chided.

"Yeah, but it's easy to forget just how cold cold really is. I've gotten quite used to California weather, thank you very much."

"I'm sure it will warm up a little this afternoon, but we may have to put in a stop and get you a good coat while we're here. You don't want to be wearing that to the theater."

"Alex, that's the first time I've heard you sound like a Fifth Avenue snob."

"Snob?"

"You heard me," Samantha grinned.

"Well, I'm not a snob."

"Couldn't prove it by that comment." Samantha put her arm in Alex's. "But I love you anyway," she purred and rested her head in the crook of her lover's arm.

Alex shook her head. "You're something else, do you know that?"

After breakfast the two women walked to the entrance to Central Park where the carriages stood, waiting for customers. Alex told Samantha to pick out the horse of her choice and the blond immediately pointed to the only palomino in the group.

"You're beautiful," Samantha cooed as she stroked the horse's head.

"And smart, too, Miss," the carriage driver informed Samantha. "Her name's Alcippe. It means 'mighty mare.'"

"Really?" Samantha asked. "That's funny because it's also the name of a daughter of Ares, the god of war."

"Don't get her started on mythology," Alex said, shaking her head and grinning. "She is a beautiful animal. We'd like the extended ride around the park, with a few additions."

"Additions, Miss?"

"Yes, like having you wait while we explore some of the attractions."

"That can be a bit pricey."

"Pricey I can handle." Alex handed the driver two hundred-dollar bills and smiled. "That's for starters. Do we have an understanding?"

"Wherever and for as long as you desire, Miss. I'm yours for the rest of the day, if you so wish." The driver tilted his hat and quickly stuffed the bills in his pocket. "My name's Harrigan." He helped his passengers into the hansom cab.

"Alex, this is so exciting," Samantha cooed as she snuggled close.

The sun was beginning to warm the air as the tour began. Harrigan described each attraction as they passed it, and Alex added personal touches from her many visits to the city. The joyous sounds of vacationing youngsters filled their ears as they passed Wollman Skating Ring. At the carousel Samantha asked if they could get out and ride, and of course the request was immediately granted.

Alcippe trotted regally through the park, slowing when they passed the important tourist areas to give her passengers time to take in the sites, which included Sheep's Meadow, the Summer Stage, the Bandshell, and the Bethesda Terrace and Fountain. Before long the palomino came to a stop front of the entrance to Strawberry Fields, directly across from the Dakota building.

"I do believe this is one of the places you requested to stop. Would you ladies like to get out and stretch your legs for a bit?" Harrigan asked.

"We'd love to," Samantha answered for both of them.

Harrigan started to get down to help them out, but Alex told him she had the situation well in hand. She got down from the carriage and extended her hand to help Samantha out. Arm in arm they walked toward the memorial.

"Look, Alex, T-shirts."

"Want one?"

"Nah, but thanks anyway."

The pathway was dotted with benches and fences. "In the spring the garden is beautiful," Alex told Samantha. "Winter doesn't do this place justice."

"I can imagine the flowers, Alex. But just being here is magical."

"Imagine. Good choice of words," Alex commented as she pointed in the direction of the mosaic that sported the title of John Lennon's famous song.

In contrast to the stark barren look of the surrounding area, the region around the mosaic was colorful and covered with cut flowers, candles, and a variety of tokens from fans who had traveled there from all over the world.

Alex broke the silence. "Would you like to walk over to the Dakota?"

"No," Samantha sighed. "This is so beautiful--this tribute to him and his music. Standing by that building would be like visiting his death, and I would rather carry away from this spot the beautiful feeling of his words and his life."

As if on cue one of the visitors turned up the sound on their boom box and *Imagine* filled the air.

The two women stood for a few minutes, holding hands as each tried to envision what the world would be like if Lennon's vision were a reality.

Alex soon nudged Samantha. The morning had already slipped away, and it was time for them to continue their tour.

They had entered and exited the park at various points throughout the trip and the last leg of their journey took them through Central Park West and past the New York Historical Society and the Museum of Natural History.

Harrigan slowed Alcippe down as they began the final leg of their ride along the lake. It was almost 3:00 when they left the park for the final time and stopped in front of the Plaza Hotel.

"Is there anywhere else we can take you ladies today?" Harrigan asked.

"I don't believe so," Alex answered, as she slipped several folded hundred-dollar bills into his hand. "Make sure you treat Alcippe to some carrots from us, Harrigan. Thank you for being a perfect guide."

The driver jumped down from his seat and offered his hand to Samantha. "My pleasure, Miss." He tipped his top hat. "Come back this evening, and I would be happy to give you two a special ride around the streets outside the park."

"Thanks for the invitation, but we have quite a full schedule," Alex answered.

"I'll bet you do, Miss. People visiting never seem to have enough time to see it all. I hope you have yourselves a great vacation. If you ever come back be sure to look Alcippe and me up."

"Thank you, Harrigan," Samantha said as she stepped down and walked around to give the horse a hug. "Thank you, girl, for a wonderful ride."

Alex had phoned for a cab to meet them at the drop-off point, and during the short ride back to the hotel, she called Al to arrange their meeting. He told Alex that he wanted to be their tour guide on Wednesday and that they should not to make any plans. Alex explained that she wanted Samantha to see the Village and Washington Square, and he agreed that they would be included in the day's activities. A few minutes later the two women were back in their suite.

"I made reservations for dinner at 7:30," Alex informed her partner. "Do you want to order something from room service for lunch, or do you want to go down to the hotel restaurant?"

Samantha glanced at her watch. "Well, it's 4:30 now so, maybe just a snack here in the room. Then we'll have time for a bath and maybe a short rest before we have to get ready."

"My sentiments exactly," Alex agreed. "What'll it be?" She handed the menu to Samantha and sat on the bed waiting for the blonde to decide.

Samantha looked at what the menu had to offer and then let her eyes roam around the room. The basket of fruit was still untouched. Next to it there was a new bottle of champagne and over on the kitchen counter there was a second basket. As she approached the new offering her eyes lit up. "Look, Alex, cheeses and crackers!"

"And your point is?"

"My point is that I don't want to spoil my dinner."

Alex laughed.

"Stop that," Samantha scolded, with a smile on her face. "I'm serious. I'm sure we're going somewhere fabulous for dinner, and I want to be hungry. We have cheese, crackers, fruit, champagne, bottled water, and a variety of sodas and alcohol."

"Well then, what are you waiting for . . . open the baskets."

Not needing to be told twice, Samantha began with the kitchen basket. She got out plates and knives and began slicing the cheese and placing the crackers on the plates. Then she grabbed an apple and a pear from the fruit basket, cut them up, and placed them next to the cheeses.

"Whaddaya want to drink, Alex?"

"Hmm, how about water?"

"Good choice." Samantha took two bottles out of the refrigerator and balanced them on the plates

as she walked into the living room. "You've been preoccupied with something since we came in. What are you looking at?" She put the plates and bottles down on the coffee table and sat next to Alex.

The brunette waved a brochure in the air. "I don't know how many times I've been here, but I've never actually taken a tour of the city. I was looking through their pamphlet and I think you might really enjoy this. It's pretty all encompassing. We'll get to visit most of the important sites and Lady Liberty. They even include a tour of Radio City Music Hall and the show, which is quite unusual."

"Wow--isn't that everything you wanted to cover on Tuesday?"

"Yes," Alex answered. "I'm impressed. If it's okay with you I think I'll book us on the tour instead of trying to do everything myself."

"Hey, you're the New York expert . . ."

"I never said I was an expert," Alex corrected. "It's just that I've been here enough times to know what is important to see and what's a waste of a day." She picked up a piece of cheese and bit into it. "Yum, I think I'm hungrier than I thought. Thanks, honey."

"You're welcome."

"Let me call and get us booked into the tour. Stay on your own plate while I'm on the phone."

"Alex!"

"Don't Alex me. I know how you are." She smiled and patted Samantha on the shoulder, then picked up the phone. When she finished with the call she returned the phone to its cradle and picked up a piece of pear. "This is good. I like this room service better than the one provided by the hotel staff."

"Why, thank you, Miss. You can call me anytime you need a snack; I'm available 24-7."

"Can't beat that." Alex smiled and scooted closer to Samantha on the couch. "Okay, tonight will consist of dinner and a trip to Rockefeller Center. Tomorrow is pretty much open except for dinner and the theater. I thought maybe we'd do some shopping."

"Sounds marvelous, Alex. I'm looking forward to the toy store."

"Oh, yeah, that's definitely a treat."

They finished eating and decided to take a leisurely bath, followed by a nap. The bath went just as anticipated, but napping was forgotten by the time the two of them lay side by side on the bed.

"I think I'm still hungry," Alex whispered into Samantha's ear.

"How could you be? You devoured that entire plate and then a banana to boot!"

"But I didn't have dessert," Alex argued.

"Dessert?"

"Yeah." An eyebrow raised as a smile graced the beautiful face of the dark-haired woman. "I have a craving for something sweet and blonde. Just a little snack." She pulled her lover close and kissed her gently on the lips. "Hmm, I think you will do just fine."

It was almost 7:15 and Samantha was still fussing with her outfit.

"Samantha, will you please stop procrastinating? Tomorrow night is dressy. The outfit you have on is perfect for tonight."

"But I don't want to feel like we're back in Laguna where anything goes, dress-wise. This is New York. New York's different."

"It's not all that different," Alex countered. "To reiterate, this is not a dress and heels night, honey. Remember, we'll be walking back from Rockefeller Center. You need to be comfortable and warm."

"Right, I keep forgetting about that. So, this looks okay?"

"No." Alex shook her head. "It doesn't look okay; it looks beautiful. You look beautiful. Now can we please go?"

Samantha took one last look in the mirror and excited hands caressed her dark green velvet pants. "Oh, wait a minute, I forgot something." She raced into the bedroom and retrieved her heart-shaped yin/yang necklace and matching earrings. She put the earrings on as she walked into the living room, then held out the necklace in Alex's direction. "Will you hook this for me?"

"Sure, come here."

"You know, every time I wear this it brings back memories of our first time in San Francisco."

"Good ones, I hope."

"More than good--fantastic."

The brunette smiled and kissed her lover on the head. "I'm happy to hear that. There--final touches all completed. Are we finally ready to go?"

"Hey, I'm ready when you are." Samantha said in a solemn voice.

Alex smiled and shook her head. "Women-can't live with them, can't live without them."

A blast of cold air hit their faces as they exited the hotel and made their way to the waiting taxi. Alex gave the driver the name of the restaurant and within minutes the vehicle pulled to the curb in front of a building decorated for the season.

The atmosphere inside was soft and quiet. The walls were decorated with autographed pictures of stars who had graciously extended thanks and good wishes to the owner of the establishment. The women were escorted to a table in the corner with a perfect view of the entire dining area. After they were seated Alex leaned over and whispered in Samantha's ear, "No one can walk into this room without you seeing them."

Excitement welled in emerald eyes. "Do you think maybe a Broadway star might come in for dinner tonight?"

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least," Alex answered with a grin. "Just remember to spend at least a small amount of time enjoying your dinner, Samantha."

"Oh, I will, Alex. I promise I will. But it would be thrilling if someone famous actually walked in while we were here."

Alex knew that it was too early for the place to be filled with actors and too late for those who preferred dining before the shows. But just watching the excitement in Samantha's face was enough to make the evening a big hit for her. "Perhaps when we go to dinner with Uncle Al we'll have more luck at seeing someone famous. Tonight you might have to be content with reading the autographed pictures."

Samantha put her hand on Alex's knee. "Just being here is enough, Alex. This place is great. Kind of like Grauman's Chinese but on the wall instead of on the floor." She giggled and turned her attention to the menu.

When they finished dining, Alex called for a cab. Winter continued to remind them of her presence, as snow flurries fell like small pixies from the sky.

"We can put off seeing Rockefeller Center if you think it's too cold," Alex said as they got into the cab.

"I'm plenty warm in this jacket, Alex," Samantha assured her. "And I brought my gloves with me. I'm ready to watch the skaters, but if you want to go back to the hotel, that's okay with me, too."

"Nope. I just thought you might want to." Alex gave the driver their destination and sat back to

enjoy the ride.

When the taxi stopped, Alex paid the driver and opened the door. The smaller woman stood on the sidewalk with her mouth open, staring at the vision before her.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" The question was half swallowed by the wind, but Alex knew what she had asked.

"Actually, I have," she answered. "I even get to take her home with me at night."

Samantha laughed and poked her lover playfully in the ribs. "You know what I'm talking about, Alexis Dorian. Look at these angels, they're magnificent! And that tree . . ." She pointed in front of them. About a block away stood the tallest Christmas tree she had ever seen. The glow from its lights encompassed the entire area surrounding the Rockefeller Skating Rink.

"It is quite a sight to behold, isn't it?" Alex agreed.

"I'll say. I've seen pictures and I always thought, 'how pretty,' but pictures don't begin to capture the beauty of this scene."

Alex placed her arm around Samantha's waist, and they walked between the rows of brilliantly lit angelic figures that heralded the arrival of the holiday season with glittering white trumpets.

When they reached the rink Alex asked Samantha if she still wanted to join the skaters.

"I don't think so. I've had enough excitement for one day; just taking in all this eye candy is enough for tonight. Besides, we have a bit of a walk back to the hotel, don't we?"

"Not too bad, but if you're getting tired, I can always call for a cab."

"No, I want to walk. Let's just watch the skaters for a bit and then take our time getting back to the hotel, okay? I need to walk off some of tonight's dinner--I'm still stuffed."

"Your wish is my command." Alex bent at the waist and smiled.

The wind turned colder and Samantha snuggled closer to her mate as they stood and watched the procession of people on the ice in front of them. Samantha started to shiver, and Alex suggested that it was time to head for the hotel. "Don't want you catching a cold."

"I won't, but I guess it's time to start back."

In unison they turned from the skating rink, and with her arm around Samantha's shoulder, Alex led the way back toward the hotel.

Many of the small tourist shops were still open and they became fleeting shelters from the now bitter cold wind. Alex and Samantha even purchased a few souvenirs before reaching their final

destination for the evening.

It was almost midnight when the warmth of the lobby greeted the two shivering visitors. Alex immediately suggested they stop in the bar for a hot toddy before continuing on to the room. Samantha quickly seconded the proposal.

Their first full day and evening in New York City had slipped quietly into the second before they finally made it upstairs to their suite.

As they readied themselves for bed, Alex noticed that Samantha's pale cheeks were aglow with the combination of wind chill and the warm rich liquid they had just imbibed. *No doubt she'll sleep well tonight*, the brunette told herself as she climbed in bed next to her lover. "Tired, Samantha?"

"Exhausted," the blonde answered. "It must have been all the cold wind in my face." She tilted her head, and sleepy green eyes focused on Alex. "Did you have something else planned for tonight?"

"Not really. It's already been a busy two days and tomorrow is another full schedule." She kissed Samantha and then waited until the smaller woman was situated to give her a hug. "Sweet dreams, honey."

"I have not doubt that they won't be," Samantha whispered. "Same to you, Alex. See you in the morning."

Sight-seeing took up all of Monday morning and most of the afternoon. They made a special stop to purchase a knee-length silver faux chinchilla coat for Samantha to wear to the theater. Although they had started quite early, they ended up rushing back to the hotel with just enough time for a quick shower before they would have to leave for the theatre.

"It's hard to believe we crammed so much into one day, Alex. I know there's a lot to see in New York, but all in one day?" Samantha giggled as she undressed and stepped into the warm water.

"You wanted the grand tour, Samantha; this is a big town. Remember, we still have Lady Liberty to see tomorrow and Radio City Music Hall. I'm just glad you found a coat you liked. That parka of yours would have looked a little out of place with your dress," she laughed. "Also, it's good you had your clothes picked out for this evening; I'd hate to be late to the show."

"No way will we be late for the theater!" Samantha yelled above the sound of running water. "But you know, even with everything we've done today, I can't wait to see the Village and Washington Square."

"No chance missing those two places," Alex retorted. "Uncle Al would never allow that. And since Wednesday is his day, by request, he promised a special tour of the Village, bohemian-

style. I think he also has a tour of the *Village Voice* slated for sometime in the afternoon."

"How cool is that!" Samantha said, stepping out of the shower and towel-drying her hair. "When I was in college, one of my friends was from New York City. He got the *Voice* delivered to the dorm. I loved the film and theater section and the no-holds-barred attitude of all the contributing journalists."

"Uncle Al said that every writer should get to see the inside of a an honest-to-goodness alternative newspaper at least once in her lifetime. I think he's as excited to be heading Wednesday's outing as you are to be going on it." Alex placed a dab of Obsession on her wrist, then turned to face Samantha, who looked stunning in her low-cut, midnight blue, sequined dress. "Wow! You look fantastic! And I think we're about ready to join the theater crowd."

"You betcha," Samantha answered. She applied a final spray of perfume and primped in the mirror one last time before joining Alex in the living room.

The brunette stood, with her coat on and Samantha's in her hands. "Here ya go, sweetie."

"Thanks, Alex." Samantha allowed the taller woman to help her on with her garment and ended up with her back against Alex's chest.

The dark-haired beauty inhaled the scent of Shalimar before bending down and whispering into Samantha's ear. "You smell good enough to eat, and if we didn't have somewhere special to go tonight I would be suggesting an early date with the bed."

Samantha turned and gave her a peck on the cheek. "If I didn't want to see Bernadette Peters perform in one of my favorite shows, I might have suggested the same thing."

Alex offered her arm and they exited the suite. Still giddy with excitement, the women entered one of New York's most elegant eating establishments. The perfect end to a perfect day came in the form of a fantastic dinner, which started with lobster bisque and ended with Samantha's favorite dessert, tiramisu. To accentuate the culinary delights, they shared a breathtaking midnight view from 47 stories high. The festive lights of the season filled the night, and as they sat in the city's only revolving rooftop restaurant, the dazzling panoramic view changed continually throughout the meal.

It was well past 9:00 a.m. when Samantha said goodbye to her pillow and slowly made her way into the bathroom. "Why did you let me sleep so late?" she yelled at Alex, who was sitting in the living room reading the morning paper.

"I didn't have the heart to wake you. Today is kind of a kick-back day; we're just going to do some shopping, see the Lady of the Harbor, take the tour of Radio City Music Hall, and watch the Rockettes dance. There was no need to interrupt your beauty sleep."

Barefooted and still sleepy-eyed, Samantha trotted into the living room and snuggled up next to Alex on the couch. "When you put it that way--thanks--but it sounds like an awfully full schedule for a 'kick-back day.'" She kissed the brunette good morning and tugged at the blanket around her lover's knees until it also covered most of her own body.

"I can get you a throw of your own, Samantha."

"No thanks, I'd rather share yours," the blonde answered. "You don't mind sharing, do you?"

Alex shrugged and smiled. "Of course not, what's mine is yours. But you're making it terribly difficult for me to read the paper with your head in my lap."

"Poor baby, but I'm sure you can manage. I have faith in you, Alex." Samantha grinned and looked coyly into her lover's face.

"Oh, well. I was about finished anyway." Alex leaned down and planted a soft kiss on Samantha's forehead. She folded the paper and pulled the blanket off both of them.

"H-e-y," Samantha whined. She grabbed for the blanket that Alex held just out of her reach.

"Want to go get some breakfast or eat here in the room?" Alex asked, ignoring Samantha's pout.

"Can we do the bagel place again?"

"Absolutely."

"Great."

"We do need to dress for the weather, Samantha. We're going to be out in the elements most of the day, and there's no sense in being uncomfortable."

"Gotcha," Samantha acknowledged as she headed for the bathroom. "Want to make it a double shower? We'll get through quicker that way."

"You really think so?" A few long strides placed Alex next to Samantha at the bedroom door. She raised a dark eyebrow and grinned. "I repeat, Samantha, do you really think we get done faster when we shower together?"

Emerald eyes sparkled. "We do when you behave yourself."

"Ah, but I never behave myself when I shower with you."

"True," Samantha giggled. "But didn't you just tell me in the other room that today was a kick-back day and that we didn't need to hurry?"

"I did."

"Well then . . . want to shower with me?"

"Absolutely."

End of Chapter 7

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive
