

~ Cheating The Pocket ~

by Cheyne

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Rating: R

Warnings: This story involves a romantic relationship between two women.

Summary: Eliane and Chris meet again a year after Eliane won a night of Chris' company in a bet.

Spoiler or Other Information: This is the sequel to "[Two Cross Side](#)." This story will probably stand on its own without reading "Two Cross Side," but you'll understand the motivation of the characters if you read that first.

Much thanks to Brenda who keeps my feet planted and Ren, who has to put up with my resistance to change. I am getting better. Somewhat.

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"What do you say, Briar? I think it's time we headed home."

The dog was a mix of Soft-Coated Wheaton Terrier and Briard. He looked up at his mistress with anticipation as he peeked at her through strands of coffee-colored fur that curled stylishly over his big brown eyes. He wagged his tail. He had been under her desk, asleep, enjoying his nap until she stirred.

"You've been such a good boy," she cooed, reaching down to scratch his chin. Her gesture of affection was returned by wet kisses on her wrist. "What do you think? Rent a couple movies and make Orville Redenbacher richer? Watch Lady and the Tramp again and sigh at the romance neither one of us will ever know?"

Briar, so named because his coat reminded her of a prickly, muddled shrub, didn't seem to care, he just seemed happy to be wherever she was. He rose, stretched and yawned.

"It's probably because neither one of us like spaghetti. Okay, I don't like spaghetti. You would probably eat anything that didn't eat you first."

The dog yipped at her and yawned again.

"Yeah, I know. It's late."

The sun had set over the city hours ago but the lights in her office were programmed to automatically illuminate the room, when natural light was no longer present. It allegedly helped to make the gradual transition from day to evening, to give the illusion one wasn't really working late. She didn't mind working late; she had nothing to go home to except a charming but lonely loft in the East Village. She quit the computer program in which she had been working and hot-cornered her monitor to screensaver mode.

She swiveled her long, elegant legs away from under her desk, pushed her chair back and stood up, stretching the day's work out of her bones. A few cracks and pops later, she strolled over to look out her floor-to-ceiling office window. Briar joined her, putting new nose prints about fourteen inches up. The maintenance staff hated that. They never had to wash her office windows on a daily basis before she had adopted the cute mutt.

She had a spectacular view of midtown Manhattan from the fiftieth floor of the Bryce Building. The dazzling luminescence of Broadway and Times Square were just one block west and were always an impressive sight. She then stared down at the busy intersection of Sixth Avenue and 42nd Street, observing a sea of yellow taxis, looking more like a swarm of honeybees trying to frantically get to a comb than vehicles trying to share a street. Although she loved this city with all its perks and flaws, she sometimes longed for the peace and quiet of a secluded mountain retreat.

A visual cascaded into her memory of the serene setting of the quaint condo she occasionally rented in the green mountains of Vermont. It was one of six connected units nestled into the side of a private Hawk Mountain resort. The retreat also included a small bar and cafe, an indoor and outdoor pool, tennis courts and access to several ski areas. It was her great escape and she did not know why she had not bought the damned place by now. It certainly wasn't for financial reasons. Maybe if she owned the condo, she would feel compelled to spend more time there.

She walked back to her desk and was about to buzz her secretary when she remembered that it was 8:30 and her faithful but harried assistant, Charlene, had left at least two hours ago. She ran her fingers over the touchpad, which activated her computer, leaned over her desk, and typed in a hasty search. She located what she was looking for, picked up her cell phone, entered the number and waited for the ringing on the other end of the line to be answered. She smiled, hearing the standard greeting and she recognized the voice on the other end.

"Hi, Vic, it's Eliane Bryce. How are you?"

"Good evening, Ms. Bryce," was Vic's response. His tone of voice was warm and familiar yet he still maintained his professionalism. "I am doing well, thank you. And you?"

"Other than going a little stir crazy, I can't complain. Listen, Vic, I know this is kind of sudden but I was wondering if my condo was still available to buy?"

"Wow, that's interesting that you should call and ask right now. Our company was just acquired and we are in the transition phase. Currently, none of the condos are available to buy, only rent."

"Really?" Eliane was disappointed. "Any idea when the condo might be available to purchase?"

"Not at this time, no, I'm sorry, Ms. Bryce." She could hear Vic typing on his keyboard. "If you are interested in the condo for eventual purchase, I will put a note in your file and the condo's file."

"Yes, I am interested so I would appreciate that and a head's up when it becomes available. I was thinking of coming up this weekend, how does that look?"

Again she heard regret in Vic's voice. "Well...Units 2 and 5 are open but 1, 3 and 4 are rented and your favorite is occupied by one of the new owners for the next two weeks."

She had only ever rented Unit 6. She liked its location at the corner of the complex and the way it was more recessed into the side of the mountain than the other condos. She was well acquainted with all of its seasonal quirks and found solace with its soothing decor and individuality. She had been given a tour of all of the condos and Unit 6 had captured her sense of comfort instantly. "Who are the new owners?"

"O'Rourke Corporation. They are from one of those Great Lake states...Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan - something like that. You know they only tell us peons what they want us to know, Ms. Bryce," Vic kidded.

The name 'O'Rourke' jumped out at her and she experienced an immediate, heart-stopping fluttering in her stomach. She cleared her throat, found her voice, and sat on her desk. "Vic, what is the name of the owner in Unit 6?"

There was hesitation on the other line. "Ms. Bryce, as much as I would like to give you that information, it is against regulations for me to do that. I'm sorry."

"Never apologize for doing your job, Vic." She was disappointed but she respected him for not violating his company policy. Had he worked for her, he would have been called on the carpet for revealing as much as he already had but she wasn't about to tell him that. She was also a little surprised that he had found the restraint not to reveal the owner's name as she was quite sure Vic would have done just about anything to make points with her. However, even if she were not a lesbian, she would not have been interested. He certainly was appealing enough but he always seemed to be perpetually separated from a wife or girlfriend; that would not have bode well for a future successful union. She wasn't about to tell him that, either.

"Yes, Ma'am." He sounded relieved.

She decided to try a different tack. She made her voice low and seductive, playing dirty. "If I told you there could be a hundred dollars in your pocket tomorrow night if you told me, would that sway you?"

Vic chuckled. "Sounds pretty important that you know."

"It is."

"Sor - I mean - I'd really like that, uh, bonus but that's a slippery slope I'd rather not slide down."

"Five hundred?" She knew he could hear the smile in her voice.

"Please, Ms. Bryce, you really should stop." But his tone told her he was enjoying every second of their conversation.

"Fine," Eliane laughed. "Let me ask you this: if the person occupying Unit 6 is named Christine O'Rourke, don't say a word. That way you have just told me everything I need to know and violated no policies." There was dead silence in response. "Very good. Thank you, Vic," she said, triumphantly. She knew, however, even before he confirmed the name, that it was Chris. She had *felt* it. Quietly, she said, "Book me Unit 5 for three days. I'll be there late tomorrow afternoon."

"Sure thing," Vic replied. "I am going to assume that your file information is all the same?"

"Yes. Oh, wait...I'll be bringing a dog with me. Will that be an issue?"

"No, it shouldn't be. You'll need to pay a deposit, though. In case it decides to deposit anything inside that leaves a smell or stain."

"He's very well behaved."

"Yes, of course. They all are," Vic said, dryly. "Okay, Ms. Bryce. I have your cell number if I need to get in touch with you before you arrive -"

"Vic, do me a favor, would you please? I would appreciate it if there was a way you did not have to let Ms. O'Rourke know my name before I get there."

Sounding curious, he said, "I don't think she will ask. She has not asked about any of the other guests. Are you two acquainted?"

Eliane smiled fondly, recalling in explicit detail the remarkable night she and Chris O'Rourke spent together nearly a year ago. "Oh, yes. We've met. Just in case, register me as E.B. Drystan."

There was silence while he apparently typed it in. "By the way, she's sponsoring a pool tournament tomorrow night. If you want to compete, you should sign up now. It's pretty full."

"A pool tournament?" Eliane was intrigued. "No, I think I will sit it out and just watch."

"Got it." Before terminating the conversation, Vic said, "Ms. Bryce? Do I still get the five hundred?"

Had it really been almost a year? Eliane's head was spinning as she hung up the phone. *Chris O'Rourke*. Eliane had never been touched as deeply, emotionally and sexually, as she had been by the petite Midwestern heiress. There was just something about Chris that affected her in a way no other woman had. It was the first time she had felt that kind of connection with anyone, much less a one-night-stand. She'd had many one-night-stands because she did travel an extraordinary amount of time and because she had yet to find a girlfriend that tolerated her long absences. Eliane's sexual partners of late were usually women she found while she gave seminars out-of-town or was head hunting for her father's many companies.

Eliane was an astonishingly beautiful woman, one from whom it was hard to tear one's eyes away, even if the observer was a straight female. She was charismatic in her confidence and commanded attention the moment she entered a room, which was, at once, a blessing and a curse. It drew people to her automatically and unfortunately, the majority were men who did not like to take a polite but firm 'No' for an answer. They would only seem to 'get it' when she would walk out with the second most beautiful woman in the room. Long before they hit the sheets, she would make it clear to her bed partner that it was just sex. She'd discovered the hard way that when a woman professed her undying love and devotion to Eliane, it usually had more to do with the love of what Eliane could provide for her than actual affection or intimacy.

Eliane learned to detach herself from intimacy. As unmistakably desirable as Eliane was, she was a lonely woman who longed for the privacy, the romance and the togetherness of being with someone permanently. No one ever came close to delivering the goods...until Chris O'Rourke. So why, after that incredible night at the Giorgio Bayside, had Eliane backed off completely?

Simply, Chris frightened her. No one had ever done that before. The intensity of emotions they shared, the many hours they stayed awake sating each other's seemingly insatiable needs was like nothing else Eliane had ever experienced. And no one since could compare or compete with what Chris had given her. The unexplainable, instantaneous sense of belonging was so overwhelming that it rendered Eliane weak. And the last thing Eliane Bryce needed to be was weak. So she had left Chris in the hotel room with a long, luxurious kiss and a promise to call but she never did. One day became a week, then a month, then six and, well, by that time she was too embarrassed to contact the stunning, bar owning pool shark. Of course, by then Eliane had also convinced herself by then that Chris had not been as interested in her as she was in Chris. Eliane had turned into something she desperately hated in other people: a coward.

It was time to face her fear and correct the biggest mistake she had ever made.

Eliane looked at her dashboard clock as she drove northbound on Interstate 87. She was making good time. She turned right, off the Corinth exit, in search of a gas station. The convenience store where she usually stopped for fuel and a cup of coffee was boarded up and out of business.

The roads on which she would be traveling until she reached her destination in the next two hours, would now all be two lane country highways and she would feel better if her rental car had a full tank of gas. She pulled in to another station about a mile up the road. She found her self relaxing more and trembling less at the idea of being face to face with Chris again. She knew what she wanted to happen between them but she would be lucky if the woman ever spoke to her again.

After she walked Briar and pumped the gas, Eliane got back on the road. She could not help but smile as she recalled her last memory of Chris displaying an adorably mischievous side. Chris had pulled a Corie Bratter, directly from a scene in *Barefoot In The Park*. She must have gotten out of bed as soon as Eliane left the room and waited until she heard the sound of the elevator arrive at the floor. Then Chris stepped out into the hallway and stood in front of the open elevator doors just in time for Eliane to turn and see Chris wrapped in a bed sheet. Wearing what must have been her sexiest grin, Chris purred, "Thank you, Ms. Smith. Be sure to look me up next time you're in town..."

Eliane was sure her expression was a priceless mixture of shock, embarrassment, amusement and lust. She might have gotten a bigger kick out of it if she had not had to ride down to the lobby in an elevator filled with fundamentalist Christians who were at the hotel for a fundraising convention. If glares of moral outrage were lethal, Eliane would have been dead multiple times over before the elevator reached the second floor ballroom loge.

By the time her cab was hailed, she was torn between wanting to return to the room to either kill Chris or throw her on the bed and ravish her senseless. Again. She chose to do neither, even as her senses flooded with wonderfully warm, sexually exquisite and new - yet strangely *familiar* - memories of the night before. Her instincts dammed the surge and told her to run very far away. And, regretfully, *that's* what Eliane chose to do.

Chris O'Rourke was on her way to the bar. She wanted to make sure all the last minute details had been taken care of before the tournament began. She'd had the felt replaced on all three tables and earlier, she and an unsuspecting opponent had played a trifecta on each table so that she could ensure the balance was all squared away. The bar sticks were brand new, variously weighted and none were even slightly bowed. She needed to check with the bartender and the bar manager to verify that all was in place for the evening.

The bar was called Corduroy's, named for the finely ridged pattern intentionally created by grooming a snowboarding course, and it was attached to the upscale restaurant at the foot of the hill. The restaurant was called Washboard's, named for small, bumpy waves in the snow. There was no doubt this was a resort area whose economy survived because of ski season. If the sale went through, and she had no doubt that it would, she would seriously consider changing the names of the bar and restaurant to something more reflective of a year-round business. She would make certain to schedule seasonal activities to bring more business to the enterprise.

As she opened the door, she looked back toward the condos just in time to see a woman and a dog getting out of a late model Mercedes. A shiver whispered through her like a ghost. The woman walked away from her, toward the office and disappeared inside. Chris cocked her head, wondering why she felt a sense of familiarity. She was neither expecting anyone nor did she know any of the locals. If the woman hadn't been blonde, Chris might have thought it was...

No. Eliane Bryce didn't live anywhere near there and she didn't play in tournaments anymore. That fantasy had ended long ago. Or should have. Chris' heart sank and she wondered when she would stop wishing for that miracle of Eliane coming to her.

Chris couldn't say that she had not thought about Eliane Bryce since they said goodbye a year ago. The fact was she thought about Eliane every day. Chris couldn't understand why the breathtaking woman had never returned her calls. She knew Eliane had felt the same bond she had and had agreed there was something different about their hook up. *Something* prompted Eliane to walk into her bar, Lilax. *Something* drew them together.

Something also pushed Eliane away from her. Phone messages and emails went unanswered and contact stopped abruptly after the elevator doors closed that morning at the Giorgio Bayside. She knew Eliane wasn't so thin skinned that her little joke outside the hotel room backfired. There was no way anyone that sensitive could survive doing the type of job Eliane did. Plus, the surprise then the smirk that graced Eliane's beautiful face seemed to say, "Very cute but I'll get you for this."

The refusal to acknowledge any attempt at correspondence had hurt Chris deeply. In the beginning she felt it might have been because Eliane was very busy. After all, Eliane had to work for her wealth; Chris did not. When weeks turned into months, however, Chris began to feel used and cheap. Even though the circumstances that motivated Chris and Eliane to spend the night together happened rather indiscreetly, Eliane had not made her feel like a one-night-stand. At least not that night.

The more she thought about Eliane, the more that smoldering ember in the depths of her lower body roared into a raging inferno. It had been in delicate balance between hunger and anger and lately the anger was overpowering the lust-filled memory of her one night with Eliane Bryce.

Chris, now furious over the aftermath of the emotional emptiness Eliane had left her with, slammed the door behind her. It startled the bar patrons and her out of her subconscious. Her eyes swept the room to see all twelve people in the bar, including the bartender, staring at her.

"Sorry," she said, as a blanket apology. "The wind took it."

"Yeah. Gotta watch them nasty nor'easters," one patron said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Especially in the middle of July."

Chris smiled and nodded, biting her lip to hold her temper. After all, it wasn't that man's problem she had just worked herself back into a frenzy about the one and only woman who could - and did - rile her to the point of unreason.

She crossed the small dance floor and approached the bar manager who was seated at a table, doing paperwork. "Looks like we're set for the tournament to start," she said.

Jon Beauchamp looked up at her and smiled. "Four of the twenty-two registered competitors are here. Most of them are locals. Another half-hour and everyone should be here."

"Just out of curiosity, are there any women registered?"

"Three. Two are sitting over there in the corner. They come up here all the time and play so they think they have the advantage of familiarity. They have no clue the beds have been replaced with new Italian slate and worsted wool. Nice touch."

"Thank you. If I'm going to hold tournaments here, I'd like a professional smoothness to the tables."

"I understand the Italian slate but why a worsted wool pool cloth?"

"The worsted wool will give the balls a faster roll and help with more accurate swerve and deflection." Chris sneaked a glance at the two women to whom Jon referred. Although this was a straight bar, they were both eyeballing her as though she were an appetizing bar snack. "What about the third woman? Another local?" Chris returned her attention back to Jon.

"Could be." He flipped a sheet of paper over. "Nope. Cherie Glover from Claremont, New Hampshire. The rest of the competition is all guys. Good thing you're not playing. No one would stand a chance."

She smiled at his compliment. He had been one of the shocked onlookers when she so effortlessly kicked her opponent's butt in practice. "I might play the champion when the tournament is over, if he or she wants to stick around. In the meantime, I'm happy to just be the organizer."

"Listen, I know I'm going out on a limb here, being that you are potentially the new owner, but would you like to have dinner sometime?"

"Actually, I like to have dinner all the time. Eating is essential to my well being," she said and grinned.

"No, I meant with me."

"I know what you meant, Jon. I was teasing you." She looked at him in appraisal. He was approximately her age, neat in his casual appearance, ruggedly handsome with a country boy appeal. If she were attracted to men, she would not be opposed to having dinner with him. "I am flattered by your offer but I think it would be best to keep this business."

He smiled and nodded. "I figured as much. I didn't think it would hurt to ask."

"You never know until you ask."

The door swung open and four men walked in, carrying cue cases and laughing raucously. They approached the bartender, ordered beer and requested the sign-in sheet. He directed them to Chris and Jon. After registering, the man who signed in as Dean Harwood blatantly sized up Chris.

"Tell me that you are the grand prize," he said, loudly, prompting the entire bar to look in their direction.

Been there, done that, Chris thought. She folded her arms and looked him up and down in the same shameless fashion. "Honestly, I don't think I'm your type," Chris said, her voice soft, her manner tolerant.

"Yeah? And what's my type?" Harwood asked, nudging his buddies.

"Inflatable?" Chris shot back, in mock innocence.

Harwood's three friends laughed uproariously. "You deserved that, Dino," one of the three said. "Not every woman sees your charm," he added, his jibe friendly.

He pursed his lips and nodded at the good-natured ribbing his friends gave him. "Yeah, yeah. Yuck it up. But none of you will be laughing when I walk out of here with the trophy." Harwood looked at Chris. "And the girl."

Chris shook her head and chuckled. "The only females I see here, Mr. Harwood, are not girls. They're women. And women are not among the trophies in this tournament."

Harwood drew a breath to speak but Jon cut him off. "Dean, you haven't met Chris O'Rourke yet. She's buying the business. Be nice to her or she'll ban you."

Harwood's eyes widened. "You're the new owner? I heard the new owner kicked Weller's ass in pool this afternoon."

"She did," Jon confirmed.

"Oh, man...a girl kicked Jesse Weller's ass?" The annoyed look on Chris' face registered with him. "Pardon me, I mean, a *woman* kicked Jesse's ass? He's the best pool whore in the area." One of Harwood's friends brought him his beer. "Man, did you hear that?" Harwood pointed to Chris. "She's the one who -"

"Yeah, we heard you," the friend said. He smiled, sheepishly, at Chris and pulled Harwood away. "Let's go scope out the competition."

Chris and Jon silently watched Harwood and his buddy join the two others in their group at a

table in the corner. Harwood was still sputtering in disbelief.

"I swear, if Dean Harwood were any more stupid, you'd have to water him twice a week," Jon commented and sighed.

"First, I think you're insulting a plant and second, I cannot believe, in this day and age, that male pool players still feel that way about female pool players. It's not like it takes brute strength to put the balls in the pockets."

"Some men still don't like to lose to women, period. It wouldn't matter if you were challenging them to tiddlywinks, it's a, uh, you know..."

"A dick thing?" Chris guessed.

"Well, I was going to say 'ego thing' but dick thing works, too."

More people entered the establishment as the rest of the tournament players checked in with Jon. Chris surveyed the interior as the level of chatter rose, glasses clinked together and the bar came alive with activity. One voice seemed to raise above all the rest and it was the boisterous bellow of Dean Harwood. His favorite sentence seemed to be, "Hey, that chick over there is the new owner, the one who kicked Weller's ass this afternoon."

"Are we going to have to shut him off before the evening even begins?" Chris asked Jon, concerned. She didn't want any problems on her debut night as the new owner.

"Dean? Nah. Heavy drinker, big talker. He can hold a lot of booze before he gets belligerent. We've really never had a problem with him here. He plays pool up here a lot. He's surprisingly good for all his swagger. The only person he's ever lost to was Jesse Weller."

"Ah. Well. That explains a lot."

"Hey, it's better to deal with Dean than with his younger brother, Lorne. I swear Lorne is living proof that evolution *can* go in reverse. He might actually show up and try to watch Dean play." He saw the questioning expression on Chris' face. "Oh, don't worry. He's been banned from here for the last year."

"What if he gets in, anyway? There are a lot of people in here. With you patrolling the crowd and Terry busy at the bar...I don't know, I just don't want any trouble."

"Don't worry, if he got in here, we'd know. You can't miss him. He's loud, mouthier than Dean. He wears an 80's mullet, got a chest expanse like a thoroughbred, rug burns on his knuckles - you know the type - a little too tall for his blood supply."

Yeah, the kind who gives a lot of straight men a bad name. She looked at Jon again before he stood up to go to his office. She genuinely liked him. Her dealings with him the past few days showed him to be a decent, honest, savvy businessman. If he wanted to stay on, she would be

glad to have him on the team. She was sure she could move him up the ladder, if that's where he wanted to go.

"I'm going to drop the tracking sheets at the bar and file these." He lightly waved papers at her. He glanced at his watch. "I'll have Terry crank the music for another fifteen minutes or so, get everyone in the mood and then we'll start. Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds like a plan," Chris said, in concurrence.

"Ms. Bryce...you've gone blonde," Vic said, stating the obvious.

Eliane smiled at him as she led Briar up to the desk. "I got bored; needed a change. I'm not sure I like it. What do you think?"

"I...it's...wow. Honestly, Ms. Bryce, you're a beautiful woman no matter what your hair color."

"Vic, you don't need to be nice to me, you're getting your tip, regardless," she said, chuckling.

"Trust me, I'm not being nice. I mean, I am but not...what I mean is -"

She decided to save him. "It's okay. I understand. Is Ms. O'Rourke still here? Has the tournament started yet?"

"Yes and not quite and none of that you heard from me." He finished confirming Eliane's information, printed a sheet of paper and placed it on the counter in front of her. He offered her a pen.

She reviewed the paperwork and took the pen from Vic. "Does Washboards still have that hand-carved, open faced, roasted turkey sandwich with the antipasto salad?" She signed the paper and pushed it back to him.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Great. I'd like that delivered to my room, along with a double cheeseburger."

"I'll call the restaurant right now. Anything to drink?"

"Nope. I've already taken care of that."

Vic heard a noise and looked down to see Briar peeking around the corner at him. "Well, hello there. Aren't you cute?"

Briar yipped and wagged his tail.

"And he's a ham and an attention junkie." She looked at Briar with great affection. "He's really a good boy."

"Do you take him with you everywhere?" Vic asked, squatting down to pet Briar.

"Pretty much. If I don't have to fly. Then he goes to his grandparents, who spoil him rotten." The last three words were emphasized in Briar's direction. He sat down and panted, happily.

Vic stood up and handed Eliane her key card. When she took it from him, she shook his hand and held it briefly.

"I know there are cameras that record the activities at the front desk. Don't react, just put both your hands in your pockets after I leave." She let go and winked at him.

"Thank you, Ms. Bryce." Vic grinned, widely. "Please enjoy your stay."

"Oh, I intend to." She walked away with Briar following.

Vic watched her disappear up the hallway that led to the condo courtyard. He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked out of camera range. He unfolded the money in his hand, expecting to see five one hundred dollar bills and instead saw the stern face of William McKinley staring back at him. Twice. "Fuck me," he whispered. "A thousand bucks? This must *really* be important." He stuck the cash back in his pocket and went back to the desk. He buzzed the restaurant and put in Eliane's order. Then he called the bar. "Terry? It's Vic. What's the most expensive champagne you have in the vaults? Perrier Jouet La Cuvée Belle Epoque? How much? One fifty? Cool. Have whoever is delivering the room service to Number Five take that, too. Except charge it to me with a big thank you." He hung up the phone. "Oh my God," he laughed, almost dissolving into a giggle. "An extra eight hundred and fifty dollars...Foxwood, here I come!"

The tournament was underway, the eliminations happening faster than Chris expected they would. It wasn't that the losers were that bad; it was more that the winners were that good. She was impressed by the level of talent she was seeing at the tables, although there wasn't anyone who stood out enough to inspire her into a sponsorship. Cherie Glover was moving up the ranks nicely but it looked like Dean Harwood was going to be the one to beat. Chris studied his style and assessed it. He was a barker whose play was aggressive. One of her biggest pet peeves in pool, other than losing, was an individual who won by pressuring another player through obnoxious behavior, speech and tactics. Harwood was one of those people. If he won, he would still get the trophy and prize money but she felt the need to knock him down a peg or two. She had no doubt he would accept her invitation to play. She had no doubt she would win. His intimidation was his size and his talk; hers was her gender and the psychological effect of that. He would be so concerned about losing to "a girl," that his concentration would be off.

Ten of the twenty-two competitors had already been eliminated. Emily Evans, one of the two

women who had been at the corner table earlier, was a dark horse. Technically, she was not a skilled player. Yet she knew enough about strategy, english and leaves to quietly move up from round to round. She had a gentle way of easing each ball into its designated pocket that earned her the game. This diametrically opposed the technique of her friend, Alexis Watterlund, who attacked each turn as though she needed to prove something through the sheer strength with which she got behind the cue ball. She slammed every ball into the pocket with a force intended to show no fear of the game or her opponents. She could have been a better player if she calmed down and balanced her approach to each individual shot.

Chris watched Alexis lose to someone who was not as skilled as she was. Alexis called the eight ball in the corner. She had a straight on shot and lessened her risk of scratching by cheating the pocket. Had she hit the cue ball gently, she would have won the game. Instead, she strong-armed the back of the stick giving the cue ball an unnecessary push that sent the eight ball into the pocket with such impetus, it popped back out and spun briefly on the table. She hung her head in defeat.

"You played a good game," Chris told her, shaking her hand and presenting her with a tournament t-shirt.

"I'm better than this," Alexis told her, believing it.

"I'm sure you are. I will be holding more tournaments here. I have no doubt you will win one. Can I give you two words of advice?"

"Sure," Alexis said, nodding.

"Speed kills."

"That's what Emily always says."

"Emily is right." Chris smiled at the embarrassed woman. Alexis seemed to equate her self-worth with her performance. "You're a good player, Alexis. Do yourself a favor; study your competition and play like you know what you're doing," Chris said, gently. "Being assertive is good. Being aggressive can only come back to bite you."

"Sometimes 'aggressive' is the only thing that make these guys take you seriously."

"Not necessarily. They're certainly taking Emily and Cherie seriously."

"I can't speak for Cherie's game because I've never seen it before but Emily will choke on the eight ball at some point. She always does." Alexis statement sounded more like experience talking than sour grapes. She looked over at Chris. "Dean said you completely shut out Jesse. That true?"

Chris nodded. "Jesse is good. But he lost site of his objective. Otherwise he might not have lost."

"You must be really good. I'd love to see you play sometime." Alexis said. She hesitated, as though waiting for an invitation. When it didn't come, she then said, "I'm surprised Jesse isn't here. He'd win hands down."

"Maybe," Chris said. "Sometimes being cocky about your own abilities is your worst enemy. I learned that the hard way."

"Why isn't he here?"

Chris shrugged. "He told me he had a prior commitment."

"Too bad. I hate Dean. He's an asshole and bully. I hope he doesn't win but he probably will."

Chris patted her on the shoulder. "The night is still young."

Eliane called Vic and thanked him for his gift and put the champagne on ice. She polished off her supper and finished feeding Briar his last bite of cheeseburger.

"Presumptuous of me, isn't it?" she asked Briar, after draping a hand towel around the bottle. He paid little attention to her and continued to lick the residual cheeseburger remnants off his chops. "She probably won't even acknowledge me. Or, if she does, it will be by poking my eyes out with a cue stick. I deserve however she responds. *If* she responds. So, my little man, if I do get her to come back here with me, if she smashes me over the head with the champagne bottle, don't bite her, okay? Trust me when I tell you it would be justified." She contemplated Chris reacting that way and hoped Chris would give her a chance to explain herself; not that she could account for her behavior, given the chance.

She stood up and stretched. "Let me take a fast shower and then I'll walk you. Do your business quickly though. I have some major groveling to do." He cocked his head, more than likely reacting to the word 'walk' than 'grovel.' "I know, I know, when have you ever known me to grovel?" She started stripping off her clothes while heading to the bathroom. "I won't embarrass us, okay? I promise. I mean, how mad can she be?"

Briar didn't need to bark his response for her to know the answer to that question.

Eliane slipped into Corduroys unnoticed. She moved along the back wall, through the boisterous crowd, and inched up to the bar. Terry was holding his own, delivering everyone's drinks without falling behind. His tip jar overflowed. He leaned over to take Eliane's order and smiled in surprised recognition.

"Ms. Bryce! How are you? What can I get for you? Your usual?" He seemed genuinely pleased to see her. And, thankfully, he had not said her name so loud that anyone beyond the first row of

patrons could have heard him.

"Actually, an ice cold beer would be great. Give me something local, on tap." She slowly scanned the pack of people and hoped to be able to spot Chris before Chris spotted her.

"Try this. Long Trail Ale Belgian White. I think you'll like it. Should I put it on your condo tab?"

"Sure. I'm in Unit 5 this time, not 6," she shouted to him, to be heard over the noise.

Terry acknowledged another patron at the bar with a nod, then returned his attention to Eliane. He gestured her hair. "I like the blonde. It gives you a whole different look."

"That was my intention," she smiled. She raised her glass to him in thanks as he moved to another area to take more orders. She sipped the clean, crisp beer and decided she liked it.

The din near the center of the bar was reaching a fever pitch. Eliane wondered if Chris was playing and then she thought that would be unethical if she were running the tournament. Eliane had never played pool in this bar so she did not have a reputation to defend. As she carefully weaved her way through the crowd, she kept her attention on point for a shaggy blonde head about six inches shorter than hers.

She was once again glad she no longer played in tournaments. She liked to control the game at her leisure, not by someone else's stiff set of rules. Although, she didn't miss the snarky, competitive attitudes of her opponents and the juvenile behavior of the guys when they lost, winning still very much had a place in her life.

Suddenly there was the slap of a break and the sound of an acrylic pool ball bouncing on the wooden floor. Then she heard the unmistakable voice of Chris O'Rourke raise above all the others.

"Mr. Harwood, you break like that again, you will forfeit the game. Is that understood?"

"Yep. Sorry. Don't know my own strength sometimes," was the scratchy reply.

Finding a spot against the wall, Eliane leaned comfortably and focused in the direction of the voices. Her eyes fell upon a stance and a body that looked like Chris' from behind but the hair was different. When the woman turned to write something down on a piece of paper on a nearby table, Eliane's breath stopped.

It was Chris. A copper-haired Chris with a longer, shoulder-length cut. *God...she's just as beautiful, if not more than, the last time I saw her. What was I thinking to just cut her out of my life like that?* When Eliane started to breathe again, her night with Chris flashed before her eyes, a memory that set her libido on fire. Funny how she could recall every little detail and nuance of a night she spent with someone a year ago and could barely remember the face of her last conquest of a month earlier.

So...they had both changed their look. Eliane found that interesting.

The final game of the tournament was underway to determine the winner. The remaining two women had been eliminated a few games before. Alexis was right; Emily choked and scratched on an easy eight ball shot to cause her defeat. Cherie lost a game later to Marc Allen, the man who now challenged Dean Harwood to the championship. Currently, Marc was ahead but that resulted from Harwood's break running into a problem cluster, one of which Marc took full advantage. Marc had a six-ball run until he became stitched behind the eight-ball. Since jumping the eight was illegal, therefore not an option, he angled the cue ball away from the eight and shot a four-railer that produced a bad leave for Harwood. The cue ball was frozen against a striped ball and that was bad for Harwood as he had solids and they were grouped near the foot string at the other end of the table.

"Looks it's finally like your inning, Dean," Marc said and smirked. His expression was prematurely victorious.

"Don't start polishing the trophy just yet, Shortstop," Harwood said. He circled the table twice to scout out his minimal options. He maintained his posturing but he was clearly rattled as his unethical sharking had toned down considerably in the last several minutes.

Chris observed Marc Allen carefully. Everyone but the friends Harwood came in with rooted for the diminutive mountain man. Marc was about an inch shorter than Chris and almost too thin. His hair resembled a grown out Beatle-cut and he had a full beard and mustache. He wore jeans, hi-top sneakers and an untucked, blue-checkered flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off. He did not strike her as the type of man who spent enough time at a pool table to be able to play the way he did or would care about owning a two hundred dollar maple pool cue with genuine pearl inlay.

Stereotypes were tricky. Marc was quiet, polite, well educated yet he looked like he should be living the life of Jeremiah Johnson, in a wooded cabin, hunting and trapping for a living. Dean Harwood was tall, burly, clean cut, looked like a Marine and behaved like a parolee on his first furlough. Chris, herself, wasn't immune; she looked like a former cheerleader or homecoming queen who should have been head of the PTA and, instead, she used to think of herself as the most predatory dyke north of the Mason-Dixon. Looks were so deceiving.

Harwood leaned down and positioned his cue stick. Being on the wrong side of the ten, he shot around the table to the four. He had called it in the corner and that's right where it went. Marc deflated and his shoulders slumped. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, you think you're so good but you're a fish just like the rest of 'em," Harwood said and laughed. He'd set himself up for a strong run.

Chris would have liked to see Marc win but the competitive part of her wanted Harwood to be the victor so she could really put her skills to work and taken his ego down a peg or two. Of course, there was always the chance that she could lose but Chris rarely thought in negative terms about her abilities playing pool and only lost in isolated incidents, incidents where she

allowed herself to be intimidated...like she had been with Eliane Bryce. She tried to shake the memory of the sultry woman out of her head but the recollection of losing at pool to her segued into the memory of spending the rest of the night in bed with her. That was a hard image to get rid of.

When Chris focused back on the game, she saw that the game was down to the eight ball. Harwood called it in the far corner and the eight rode the rail all the way to the designated pocket where it dropped sweetly, rendering Dean Harwood the champion of the first Hawk Mountain Pool Tournament.

"Yeah, baby!" Harwood yelled. He looked over at Chris and opened his arms wide. "Come give daddy a big kiss!"

Chris laughed in spite of herself. "Uh...no." She did shake his hand, award him a trophy and present him with a crisp hundred dollar bill. Runner up Marc Allen received a smaller trophy and a dinner-for-two gift certificate at Washboard's. The third best pool player got a small trophy. Every registered player received a tournament t-shirt.

"So how about you and me play," Harwood predictably said to Chris after the presentation was over. "Let's just see what you got."

"Sure," Chris said, amiably, and moved through the crowd to the office, where she returned with a case. She opened it and pulled out her purple cue glove and her Blaze VR-5. She locked the shaft and butt together with a twist. "I'll rack, you break."

Harwood was already a little disturbed by the confidence in which Chris handled her equipment. That was a serious money stick she possessed and he had never seen anyone actually use a cue glove except the professionals on television. He was uncharacteristically quiet as she arranged a New York rack on the balls. She effortlessly spun the triangle upward away from the fifteen balls that never budged.

All eyes in the bar were now on the two competitors. A pair of sky blue eyes watched with particular interest.

Eliane flooded with warmth at the sight of the familiar cue and glove as she observed the cool, composed redhead. Chris patiently waited for Harwood to miss, which he did three shots after the break. With everyone else, he was good at finding each pocket consistently and now he seemed only capable of banging the balls around the table. The psychological effect Chris had over him was pronounced. While he watched, helplessly, Chris not only cleared the table of all her solids, including the eight ball, she finished up what Harwood left behind, never missing a shot.

It was arrogant and overkill and Chris knew it. She asked herself if she would have done the same thing had one of the females won and her answer was yes, if the winner had acted like Harwood through the entire tournament. She faced Dean Harwood and mustered up her most charming smile. "Would you like a rematch? Best two out of three, maybe?"

Harwood stared at her in contemplation. It took him a few minutes to respond as he recovered from the shock of how Chris so efficiently and effortlessly defeated him. He turned to one of his buddies. "What do you think?"

"I think you should graciously accept your victory and come have a few beers to celebrate," his friend said.

"But..." He looked like he really wanted to play again.

"Dino? You're played out, man. She'll be around. Come back and challenge her another time," his friend told him.

"Yeah, you're right. Some other time." Harwood looked at Chris and non-threateningly poked his finger at her. He grinned. "This ain't over. You got lucky. Next time."

"I'll be honored to play you again," Chris said and slightly bowed while Harwood disappeared into the crowd. Chris looked around at the intrigued patrons closest to her. "Tables are now open for free pool the rest of the night. Anyone wish to play?"

"Against you?" The question came from one of the tournament players who had been eliminated early.

Chris shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

"Not after you handed Dean his ass like that." Everyone who heard the comment laughed.

"Okay, fair enough," Chris said, cordially. She started to remove her glove.

"I'll play you," a silky smooth voice said.

Chris would have known that voice anywhere and for a moment, she lost all of her breath. She composed herself before she turned to deal with the woman who had been haunting nearly all of her dreams for a year.

She expected to see the tall, dark, exotic French-Scottish beauty and, instead, came face to face with a sultry blonde. The woman was definitely Eliane but, like Chris, she had changed her appearance. Eliane was still stunning with long, flowing, wavy, golden locks in lieu of her former straight, jet-black hair and Chris was briefly speechless as she took in those incredible blue eyes that bewitched her the year before.

The room was still as this exchange took place. The crowd appeared to be startled by the sudden aesthetic atmosphere in front of them and by the attitude that they couldn't believe the new owner was being challenged by another woman just as hot as she was. To a majority of males in the bar, this was almost as good as watching female mud wrestling.

Chris and Eliane continued to stare at each other in silent evaluation. Finally, Chris spoke. Her voice was quiet but firm as she looked down at her hand and finished removing her glove. "No, I don't think so."

As calm as she tried to be, it was obvious Chris was rattled. She heard a collective "Aw..." from the crowd, among other curious and some derogatory comments.

"Are you sure? If nothing else, we'll give them a good show," Eliane said.

Chris knew that Eliane's voice couldn't help but be seductive, it was intrinsic but that didn't make it any easier to resist her. Chris had to force herself not to look at Eliane, make herself not fall back into this woman's web. Chris hated her for what she'd done and wanted her for what she could do. And therein lay the problem; the second Chris saw her again, she wanted her again. She suddenly started hating herself and her weakness to fight the spell this woman had on her.

The crowd around the tables started to chant, "Play! Play! Play!" and despite herself, Chris smiled. She finally looked back at Eliane.

"All right. I'll play," Chris said. As the crowd cheered, she stepped closer to Eliane. "Don't even think the stakes will be the same as last time," she snapped. She turned from Eliane and put back on her glove.

"No problem," Eliane responded. She was clearly not surprised or upset by Chris' hostility and Chris was torn between being grateful or upset that her anger was taken in stride. Eliane walked over to the wall rack and checked the cues for weight. She removed a 21-ounce stick and examined it. Satisfied with its utility, she walked back to the foot rail of the table and racked the balls. As she arranged the order in the triangle, she said, "Any stakes at all, Ms. O'Rourke?"

Chris chalked a house stick to break with. "No stakes." She blew the excess powder off the tip. Eliane lifted the triangle and returned it to the wall hook as Chris leaned into her break stance. Suddenly she stood up and squinted at Eliane. *Good God, she's beautiful*, Chris thought as her blood boiled. The contradiction of these feelings frustrated her immensely. "I'm changing the game. We're going to play One Pocket. Rules are whoever makes eight points first wins. Fouls are a one point loss and re-spotting of a previously potted ball. A scratch rewards the opponent with ball-in-hand behind the head string."

"One Pocket works for me. Do you want me to re-rack?" Eliane asked.

"No." Chris patted the foot corner to her right. "This will be my pocket."

Eliane nodded and gestured to the foot pocket to Chris' left. "Then I guess that one will be mine." She moved to the side, out of Chris' sight line as to not distract her shot but never outside her peripheral vision. As Chris was about to take her break stance again, Eliane said, "No stakes?"

Chris took a deep, aggravated breath and crooked her finger at Eliane who obeyed and approached her. To anyone else she would have said, *'See? I knew I could make you come with*

just one finger,' but she would never say that to Eliane. She knew exactly what drove Eliane to orgasm and she could not allow herself to visualize the face of ecstasy of the woman now standing in front of her. She didn't want anyone around them to hear what Eliane might have to say, so she kept her voice low and turned her body away from the patrons. "What do you want?" Chris snarled.

"If you win, you get whatever you want. If I win, we talk. Tonight."

"If I win, I get to walk away from you and you never come near me again?"

Eliane tilted her head and peered deeply into Chris' emerald eyes. "Is that what you really want?" For a few seconds, Eliane actually looked vulnerable.

"Yes," Chris growled, with no hesitation. She returned to the table and broke.

Eliane knew Chris would be furious with her and understandably so but she underestimated the magnitude of Chris' wrath. She was hoping that maybe a small part of Chris would be happy to see her and thought she might have seen a hint of a spark when their eyes first met but she must have been mistaken. Chris was clearly only being civil because there were other people around.

The bar patrons watched the two competitors as closely as watched the rarely played game of One Pocket. The scrutiny lavished on them would have made anyone else uncomfortable but Eliane's focus was totally on Chris. She watched the action on the table with which Chris placed her sole attention and if Eliane didn't put her mind back in the contest, she was going to lose both the game and Chris.

Chris had sent the 11 ball cross-corner into her target pocket and then she fouled when the cue ball followed the stripe and dropped due to a bad roll. It was an amateurish mistake that made Eliane wonder if Chris' concentration really was wrapped up in the game. By the way Chris slammed the butt of her stick on the tile floor, she knew it was novice mistake, also. She looked up at Eliane. "Your inning."

"Thank you." Eliane removed both the cue ball and the 11 from the pocket and spotted them. She looked over the layout. If they had been playing Eight-Ball, she could possibly run the table but with One Pocket, the technique required so much more skill and precision, she had to be exact with each leave. Currently the score was four to nothing and would have been five to nothing if Chris had not scratched.

Eliane had to bank the cue ball so it came up behind the three and hit it into her corner. That put her in line for an easy cross-corner shot. Her next three shots were set up so that she could deftly angle them into the pocket without the worry of committing the same foul as Chris. It was now five to three as Eliane studied the layout for her next strategy.

"You are so good at cheating the pocket," Chris said. Eliane thought she detected a hint of

admiration in her tone. Then Chris shattered that illusion when she continued. "I see you live your life the same way. Nothing straight on."

Eliane dazzled Chris with a smile. She slowly wagged her finger at her opponent. "You don't get to jump the stakes. We only get to talk about this if I win, which I haven't...yet."

Chris look startled. She opened her mouth but no sound followed. She sputtered but still couldn't get her voice to work.

Eliane took advantage of Chris' inability to speak and potted another ball. On her seventh attempt, nothing fell and it was Chris' turn again. The expression on her opponent's face was not pleasant and Eliane knew she had pissed off the smaller woman. If she won this game, she would let Chris think it was a part of her grand design and, subconsciously, maybe it was. Eliane knew she was a better player than Chris in Eight-Ball but she had no knowledge of Chris' skill in One Pocket.

She watched Chris survey the table and compose herself. It was then she realized that her heart had not stopped fluttering since she and Chris looked in each other's eyes for the first time in a year. She almost felt as though she were about to hyperventilate. As unobtrusively as possible, she took several deep breaths. *This is insane, Eliane. Kick her sweet little ass and get the hell out of here so you can hopefully change her mind about you.*

Chris sunk three more balls and missed on the seventh. The score was now six to six. More people gathered around the vicinity of the table, intrigued by the rivals.

Eliane potted another solid for seven and fouled on the game ball, which brought the score to seven to six. Chris re-spotted the cue and the eighth ball, then shot an unchallenging set up to tie up the score. She shot at her last ball and missed but the roll positioned the cue ball frozen against the rail, which left Eliane with no shot. Eliane's only defense was to return the favor if she could. She studied her options; there was only one but she would have to angle the cue stick perfectly and use the exact amount of topspin to get it where she wanted it. She did her best hitting the cue ball away from the rail with a perfect arc and smacked the four with enough force to drop it in the pocket. It was down to the game ball again.

Eliane chalked her stick and took stock of the situation. The two-ball stood alone and looked to be a dead shot cross-corner. She tried not to smile but she couldn't help glancing up at Chris and winking. Her cockiness faded, however, when the cue ball double-kissed the two and stopped short of the pocket. Eliane was stunned. Not only did she just commit a novice mistake, she also just lost the game.

"Back away, Ms. Bryce. I believe it's my shot." Chris could not disguise the glee in her tone. A straightforward shot pocketed the two. Chris immediately removed her glove and broke apart her stick. "I believe our business is done."

Eliane couldn't believe it. Chris walked away. She just put her Blaze back in its case, walked into the bar office and shut the door in her face. Eliane replaced the bar cue, shook her head and walked to the bar.

"Hey, Legs, that was some pretty good shootin'. Sorry you lost. Can I buy you a beer?"

Eliane turned to see Dean Harwood leering at her. "Legs?"

He looked her up and down. "Ain't you ever noticed how they start at your shoulders? I think Legs fits ya."

She really wasn't insulted by his bluntness. First, he was pretty inebriated and second, she was still dazed by Chris' actions. She should have been prepared for it but she never struck out with a woman before. On the other hand, she rarely went back a second time after she had dumped someone.

"So what do you say?" Harwood said.

"I say thanks but no thanks. I think I'll just head out."

"Raincheck?" Harwood asked, hopefully.

Terry leaned over the bar. "Dean, stop bugging Ms. Bryce, she -"

"No, Terry, it's fine, thank you. He wasn't bugging me. But I am going to go back to my place. Can you send a chilled bottle of chenin blanc to my place, please?"

"I'll order it right up, Ms. Bryce."

"Thanks, Terry." Eliane looked at Harwood. "No offense. It's been a long day."

Harwood nodded and watched her walk out.

Eliane and Briar had just come back from his walk when there was a knock on the door. The dog yipped a few time but quieted when Eliane hushed him. She opened the door for the server who brought her the bottle of wine.

"Shall I open it for you, too, Ma'am?" the young man asked.

"No, I'll do it, thank you." She took the bottle from him, handed him a twenty dollar tip and shut the door. "You know I wouldn't drink this by myself but I'm a little upset," she said to Briar. He cocked his head at her. "If you drank wine I'd pour you a glass." She opened the bottle and searched the cupboard for a wine glass.

There was another knock on the door. Eliane glanced at the door and took the bottle with her. "Now what?" she mumbled, annoyed. When she opened the door, Chris O'Rourke barged in. Eliane closed the door behind her.

Chris turned around to face Eliane. "How fucking dare you!" Her fists rested on her hips. "I can't believe your arrogance!"

"Um, hi, Chris, how are you?" Eliane braced herself. This was not going to be pretty.

"How am I? *How am I?* What is wrong with you? You ignore me for a full year, you don't return my calls or answer my emails...you made me feel like a cheap piece of ass and then you stroll back into my life expecting what? An open arms welcome? Another night between the sheets? How fucking dare you!" She was shaking with anger.

"I know. I'm sorry. I had no right." Eliane had never felt so humbled.

"Exactly! You had no right..." Chris stopped and took several deep breaths. "Why are you agreeing with me? You can't agree with me yet, I'm not done mopping the floor with you."

"I agree with you because you're right. I was horrible to you. I treated you deplorably. I understand if you never wanted to see me again. I regret my behavior and I made poor choices that have haunted me for a year."

Chris stared at her for several minutes while she calmed down. "You could have changed your behavior at any time."

"I know. And I should have but after a while, I was too embarrassed."

"By what?"

Eliane bowed her head and sighed. "Would you like some of this wine before it gets warm?" She looked up at Chris. "I was going to drink it by myself..."

"No, I don't want any wine. I want to know what the hell happened, Eliane. I realize it was only one night but I thought we had connected. I thought you felt what I felt, that what we shared was different -"

"It *was*. What we shared was staggering and I'm not talking about just the sex. I did feel what you felt, I swear to you."

"Then why did you just...walk away?" Chris' tone revealed a desperate need to know.

It took Eliane a moment to gather the courage to say what she had spent a year dreading to admit. "Because it scared me. You scared me. Being with you touched something so deep inside me, I didn't want to believe it was possible. So I kept telling myself it wasn't. I am so sorry, Chris."

Chris began to pace. "Why are you here? How did you know where to find me?"

Eliane walked to the counter and pulled a corkscrew out of the drawer. "Initially, I didn't know you were here." She continued to explain as the cork inched free with a pop and she filled a wine glass.

"You're telling me this was all coincidence?" Chris stopped, incredulous.

"Or kismet which, if I remember correctly, you don't believe in either." Eliane sipped her wine as she watched Chris absorb all she had just told her.

"Why now? You could have found me anytime. You knew where I was."

Eliane shrugged. "I can't answer that because I don't know. When I knew you were here, I knew it was time. I had to see you and find out if you could forgive me and maybe give me another chance."

"A chance to do what? Fuck me and walk away from me again?" Chris' voice level rose.

"No. A chance to see if a relationship could be as magical as that night we spent together." Eliane's tone was calm, soothing.

Chris thought about Elaine's words. "That would have been welcome a year ago. Now? I don't know if I can trust you. You told me last year that you thought we should pursue the possibility of a relationship. How do I know you won't get scared and leave again?"

"I can't promise you I won't get scared. I'm scared right now."

Chris narrowed her eyes in disbelief. "You don't look scared."

"I'm not used to letting my guard down, Chris. You have no idea how difficult it is for me to apologize, to admit I was an idiot or to pour out my feelings. I would never do this with anyone else. Honestly, I've never been in the position of wanting to be with anyone so much in my life."

"You've had a very odd way of showing it." Chris scrubbed her face with her hands out of frustration and started to pace again. "Did you think I would still be single?"

"Well...actually...yes. Are you?"

The look on Eliane's face told Chris that thought had not crossed her mind, which infuriated Chris all over again. "Jesus, Eliane, you are unbelievable!"

Eliane took a step closer to her. "Are you?"

"No! Did you think I'd wait for you? Did you think I would stop my life and just pine until you got your head out of your ass? Your self-importance just floors me."

"So you're with someone. I guess that shouldn't surprise me." Eliane looked and sounded defeated. "You certainly are a catch. She's a very lucky woman. Is she here with you?"

"No. This was a business trip not a vacation." Chris headed toward the front door. "I don't know what else to say to you and it still hurts to see you."

"Chris, wait..."

"Why? What's the point?" Chris put her hand on the doorknob.

Eliane hung her head. She wanted to crawl in a hole and hibernate but only after she kicked her own ass for being so stupid. "You're right. There is no point. I can't say it enough...I am so sorry. I fucked it up, I *know* I fucked it up and if I could change it, I would."

"You know, I would love to tell you that makes me feel better but...it doesn't." She opened the door and left.

Eliane stared at the closed door for what seemed like an eternity. She breathed out a disappointed sigh and drank the rest of the contents of her glass. She was crushed. She returned to the counter and poured herself another glass of wine. "Briar? Where are you?"

She heard a noise and looked down. Briar looked up at her and sat at her feet.

"At least I still have you. Yes. You're a good boy. And you love me with all my faults, which are obviously many more than I thought. So what did you think of her, huh? I messed up big time, didn't I?" He looked at her, yawned and then lay down. "The next thing you know there'll be a knock on the door, telling me the new owner wants us out of here."

As soon as the words left her mouth there was a knock on the door. Eliane glanced at the door and then back at Briar. "I was kidding. This better not be that. I would say that's taking retribution just a little too far."

She stomped to the door, opened it and suddenly found her arms full of Chris. The smaller woman jumped up and wrapped her arms around Eliane's shoulders and her legs around Eliane's waist. She began kissing Eliane with a passion that only ten minutes earlier matched her anger.

A stunned Eliane was propelled backward a few steps before she caught her balance and it registered what had just happened. She accepted Chris' lips on hers without hesitation. Eliane placed her hands on Chris' behind to hold her in place. She managed to shut the door, then leaned Chris against it.

Chris put her hands on both sides of Eliane's face. "I love the blonde hair," she panted, between kisses.

Eliane nodded. "The auburn looks really nice, too," she breathed before attacking Chris' mouth again. With one hand still supporting Chris, the other hand snaked up the back of Chris' shirt and, after unhooking her bra, traversed the warmth of Chris' skin. "What about your girlfriend?" Eliane murmured into Chris' neck.

"I lied," Chris confessed. She lifted her chin so Eliane could kiss everywhere.

"Good." Eliane moved her lips over every inch of exposed flesh she could find. As she worked with Chris to remove her t-shirt and bra, she thought she was going to erupt in a spontaneous climax. No one aroused her like Chris and her being this excited before they even began more intimate contact just proved that. Clothes dropped to the ground as Eliane bent her head to take an erect, pink nipple in her mouth.

"Oh my God," Chris gasped at the feeling of her breasts once again being ravished by the infuriating woman of her dreams.

"Pants. Off. Now." Elaine wanted to be inside Chris so bad she could barely breathe at this point.

Chris unlocked her legs and Eliane stepped back from the door that anchored them while Chris unzipped and shed the rest of her clothing. Eliane lifted her up and leaned her back against the door. Eliane's fingers found Chris' center and began to stroke.

"Jesus, you are so ready for me," Eliane said, unnecessarily.

"Bed."

"Not yet." Eliane pushed two fingers inside Chris and began to thrust while Chris rode Eliane's hand.

"So good, so good..." Chris repeated as she clung to Eliane. The orgasm began to build and swirl and radiate until she felt she could no longer breathe and it finally overtook her with a force that wrung her out with pleasure and left her weak and feeling boneless. She gasped for air as she rested her head on Eliane's shoulder.

Eliane was trembling. She could not believe how much she had wanted this. When she regained her equilibrium, she held Chris securely and carried her into the bedroom.

Chris stretched out on top of a naked Eliane. They concentrated on kissing for an extraordinary length of time until Chris moved down Eliane's body to devote her talent to Eliane's immediate need. She deeply breathed in Elaine's scent. She parted Eliane, tenderly licked and suckled her and increased the momentum when Eliane's moaning and movement indicated more impetus was needed to get the job done. When Eliane really began to rock, it was hard for Chris not to lose her place but she masterfully kept up and was rewarded with Eliane experiencing several intense

lower body spasms.

She turned her head to the left and rested the side of her face on Eliane's thigh. She sighed contentedly and opened her eyes to see two curious brown eyes staring at her. She yelped and hopped to her knees. Briar barked.

"What is that?" Chris pointed.

Eliane took Chris's wrist and pulled her down next to her. "That's my dog." She reached her hand out and Briar walked to her and licked it.

"You got a dog?" Chris looked at her then back at Briar, who wagged his tail. "He seems to like you. That's a plus. How long have you had him?"

"Not quite a year."

"And he's still with you. Hmmm...maybe you *are* serious about this commitment thing." For that comment, Chris received a tweaked nipple. "Hey!" She slapped Eliane's hand away, playfully.

"Isn't he cute?"

"He looks like a shrub with a tail."

"That's what I thought, that's why I named him Briar."

Chris rolled back on top of Eliane again as Eliane locked her fingers together behind Chris' shoulders. "I can't believe I'm in bed with you again."

"I'm not letting you go this time," Eliane told her, softly but determined. "I don't care what I have to do to keep you, I'll do it."

"What if I don't want to be kept?" Chris asked, smiling.

"I'll change your mind."

Chris reached down, grabbed Eliane by her pubic hair and yanked.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"That was for ignoring me for a year." Chris still hadn't let go. "Look how much time we wasted. You ever do that to me again and I'll track you down, string you upside down naked over an open fire and pluck every one of these out one by one with a tweezer."

"Note to self: Never piss off Christine O'Rourke again."

Chris tugged again. "I'm serious."

"If you keep doing that, you won't have a chance; I'll be bald."

Chris eased her grip, flattened her hand and began to fondle the same area. Eliane was instantly ready and began to move up and down with the motion of Chris' hand. Eliane locked her legs around Chris' back and Chris easily slid her fingers inside, using the pad of her thumb to enhance the stimulation. It didn't take long before Eliane cried out in ecstasy. The orgasm lasted so long, Eliane actually thought she might pass out.

"I've never met anyone who had my number like you do. You know exactly what to do to always send me over the edge," Eliane said, once she was able to speak.

Chris' head rested on Eliane's shoulder. "I can't believe you've been afraid of this."

"I had convinced myself it was too good to be true."

"I must be crazy but I'm going to give you another chance. I promise you, though, if you walk away from me again, there won't be a third time."

"And I promise you, you'll have to blow me out of your life with dynamite."

"Hmmm...I can think of much better ways to get you to explode." She smiled, seductively.

"As you have already so deftly demonstrated." Eliane rolled them over so that their positions were switched. "And I'm looking forward to taking a very, very long time experiencing every single one."

When Eliane awoke the next morning, she was more relaxed than she had been in, well, a year. She stretched languorously and suddenly realized she was alone in bed. "Chris?"

There was no answer. She noticed the stillness in the condo. Eliane got up, put on a bathrobe and walked to the living room. "Chris?"

She thoroughly searched every room to find no trace of Chris. *No. She wouldn't do this to me. She couldn't. I realize I was an idiot but this would be too cruel. Especially after all the promises we made to each other last night.* Eliane walked back to the bedroom with the intent of getting dressed and finding out what the hell was going on when she remembered she hadn't seen Briar.

Eliane returned to the living room. "Briar?" There was no response. "Briar! Where are you, bug?" *She left and kidnapped my dog?* She tried to make sense out of that concept when the front door opened.

"There's mommy," Chris cooed at the dog. Briar's body wiggled sideways toward Eliane.

"Oh. *Oh*. You took him for a walk." Eliane bent down, patted the dog's hindquarters and scratched his head.

"Yes. Why? Did you think I had run off and taken your dog with me?" Chris asked. She smirked as she put Briar's leash where she had found it.

Eliane laughed a little too uproariously. "Of course not. I mean, how silly is that?" She looked up to see Chris staring at her, eyebrow arched in disbelief. Eliane stood up. "Okay, it crossed my mind that maybe you were trying to teach me a lesson."

"Why would I have taken your dog?"

"Give me a break, I'm not awake yet," Eliane said, sheepishly.

Chris smiled and opened her arms. Eliane stepped into Chris's embrace. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news but you're stuck with me."

"If that's your idea of bad news, then bring on the bad times." Eliane held Chris close.

Briar stood on his hind legs and rested his front paws on Eliane's robe. He yipped and danced around. "I think someone's a little jelly bean."

"A what?" Chris asked.

"He's jealous of the attention."

"Well, he's just going to have to get used to it." Chris squeezed Eliane.

"So am I," Eliane said. She bent her head and kissed Chris' waiting lips. The action caused another fire to ignite within her. She was almost embarrassed by the intensity of libido Chris conjured up inside her. They continued to kiss until Eliane found herself falling back on the bed again. She had not even felt Chris moving them.

Chris straddled her and unbelted Eliane's robe, opening it. "I can't get enough of you," Chris said, softly. She appraised the perfection of her lover's upper body and the blemishes she had left on it the night before.

"You marked me, didn't you?" Eliane didn't have to check. She had felt it being done and the look in Chris' eyes told her the answer.

"Not where anyone but me can see it."

Eliane pulled Chris down and rolled over on top of her. "Last night you commented that I was good at cheating the pocket. I think there is someone else in this room who is a lot better at it than I am."

"What, you want to talk pool metaphors now? Then how about a little push shot with some bottom English and a double kiss?"

Eliane laughed. "Guess that means I won the break." She nuzzled Chris' neck and began to unbutton her blouse.

Chris looked up at her, lovingly. "I think we tied on that win."

The End

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