

~ Love Bites ~

by k alexander

DISCLAIMER It's all mine. Mine mine mine! (...um, except for the lyrics)

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Constructive criticism welcomed. Find me at: kalex@webmail.co.za

"You *want* some of this, you mother-fugly hairy troll woman?"

Immediately the bar became silent. Several dozen sets of cautious eyes swivelled to the left to take in the glowering visage of the large leather-bedecked woman who had just been called a mother-fugly hairy troll. Then, they swivelled to the right, to take in the glowering visage of the woman who had just called someone twice her height, size and attitude a mother-fugly hairy troll. She was very drunk, which was patently clear by the way her words bled into each other. The woman she had just insulted didn't really care, which was patently clear by the way she was currently moving forward at a menacing speed.

Cracking her neck first in one direction, and then in the other, Beck threw the pool cue to one side and lifted her fists. "Bring it **on**, troll!" Unfortunately she was very, *very* drunk, and the troll-woman brought it on about two seconds before her brain was ready. A massive fist smacked straight into her face, knocking her backwards on her ass. Even as she skidded through sticky tacky things she'd have been disgusted by if she'd been sober, her face pounding like a troll-woman had just decided to put a fist through it, she was already planning her retaliation. When her backwards movement stopped she lurched to her feet - "Come over here, troll!" - and promptly knocked her feet together, sending her crashing face-first onto the floor. Managing to straighten out her neck, she was faced with the sight of two massive boots right at eye-level. Her soul was raring to go, but her body disobeyed stubbornly.

"Get up, you little runt." At least, Beck thought the woman had said runt. Well, her limbs weren't exactly obeying at the moment, and from the warmth on her chin she thought her nose might be bleeding, but she was not about to let a troll speak to her like that. Pulling her arms in under her, she attempted to push herself up from the floor. Just as she was (inelegantly) getting onto all fours, another set of feet joined the boots. These feet were, if not exactly dainty, encased in elegant, obviously-expensive leather heels. A smooth voice rang out, just above her head. Probably the owner of the pricey shoes.

"Look, you've had your satisfaction. No need to continue this, is there?"

"What are you... her fuckin' nanny?" The troll-woman was obviously still pissed off, and if Beck could just get on her feet, she knew she could give her so much more to be pissed off *about*.

"I know she's behaving like a child, but she's so drunk she's barely able to defend herself. How much fun is that really for you?"

"Truckloads." At least, Beck *thought* she said truckloads. It was a mean grumble, but troll-woman was losing steam against this lady with her well-modulated voice. Trying to get one leg in under her Beck collapsed again, muttering a curse.

"Let me take her home, all right? Be the bigger... better woman. Show some compassion. I would truly appreciate that." It was the lilt on the word "truly" that did it.

Spitting out a half-hearted expletive troll-woman shrugged. "Fine. No skin off my nose. Just get this little shit away from me."

"Thank you." Beck was still trying to remember which side of her body her feet were on when a hand hooked casually under her right arm and hoisted her up. The upwards motion was a nauseating blur, and it took a while before her focus returned to such a degree, however minor, that she could see her redeemer. Even then she couldn't see much, because the woman holding her casually by one arm was tall, even taller than troll-woman. A tailored jacket hovered under her nose, covering a chest she recognised as a good one even in her state. Throwing back her head Beck glared at the woman. She was blurry, but Beck could just make out a pair of blue eyes and a serious but attractive face.

"Put me down, Big Sexy. Hands off."

The woman lifted her eyebrows coolly. "No. Not until I can be sure that you won't charge back into the fray and get yourself killed."

"I can take her. I can." To illustrate Beck bared her teeth and made a snapping motion in troll-woman's direction, and promptly found herself being marched outside by the tall woman from whose hand she couldn't budge. "Hey!"

The cool air hit her with impunity, flowing icily through her bruised nose, and suddenly she just wanted to gag. Apparently psychic, her rescuer let go of her arm at just the right time. Dropping forward towards the gutter Beck retched until her stomach couldn't take it anymore. Then, with a sigh, she rolled over to sit on the curb and propped her elbows on her knees. Well, on the second try, anyway. Craning her head backwards she squinted at the tall woman.

"Don't hang over me like that. Makes me nervous."

The woman's voice was slightly chilly. "I am *not* about to ruin my suit by sitting in the gutter."

"Suit yourself, Big Sexy."

"Please don't call me that."

"I call it like I see it, Big Sexy." Twisting her torso around she treated the woman to what she imagined to be a smouldering look. "Hey... wanna come ruin your suit at home with me?"

From her great height the woman stared down at Beck disbelievingly. "Are you propositioning

me?"

"Nah. I'm hitting on you."

"It's the... " Folding her arms the woman shook her head. "Never mind. I'm calling you a taxi."

"Call me what you want, Big Sexy, as long as you're calling it all night. Heh." Fumbling in her pocket she pulled out a set of car keys and promptly dropped them on the ground, inches from the grating of the gutter. "Whups. Little bastard."

The tall woman was suddenly beside her, not amused as she bent almost double to pick up the fallen items. "You're deluding yourself if you think I'm actually going to allow you to drive in this state."

"Hmm. I love the way you talk, Big Sexy. You talk dirty with big words too?"

"Oh, for heavens' sake." Folding her fingers around the keys, the tall woman straightened up and looked around. "Show me which car is yours."

Pointing a wavering finger at a battered old Chevy truck Beck grinned. "Wanna take me for a ride?"

Once again a hand slipped in under her arm and hoisted her up, and then the tall woman was leading her to the parking lot. "Okay. Where do you live?"

The ride passed by in flashes of bright light and patches of darkness. Twice Beck reached out to put an unsteady hand on the nice-looking thigh next to her, and twice it was removed silently. When they reached the apartment building the tall woman parked expertly and then unfolded from the truck, coming around to wrap a hand around Beck's arm.

"Come on, then."

In the elevator Beck considered sidling up to the tall woman, but she was just alert enough to know that any sort of leaning would result in falling. Thus she stayed where she was, keeping up the suggestive patter and enjoying the flush that crept up the woman's high cheekbones after a few particularly lewd comments. When they finally entered her apartment she shrugged out of the woman's grasp, and then out of her jacket, dropping the item of clothing on the floor carelessly. At least she'd cleaned before she left for the bar tonight.

"Wanna drink?"

The woman stood by the door uncomfortably. "No, and I hardly think you should, either."

"I shouldn't, but I do. C'mon, Big Sexy."

"I wish you wouldn't call me that." Pushing away from the door the woman shook her head.
"You're a mess, you know. Let me clean up your face first."

"What, I'm not cute?" Pouting for effect Beck couldn't fail to notice the tightness around her eye, and the sensation turned her petulant. "I coulda taken troll-woman. I could have."

"Sure. You could have taken her at least ten minutes to trample into the carpet. Where's your bathroom?"

"Big Sexy... you don't believe in me? That hurts my poor bruised little ego."

Ignoring Beck's sulk the tall woman walked through the living room, peering into each doorway until she found what she was looking for. "Where's your ... " Catching sight of Beck standing inanely in the middle of the floor she shrugged and began to rifle through the bathroom cabinet. "I apologise, if you'll even recall this tomorrow. I hate looking through other people's belongings, but I doubt you'd be a fountain of information right at the moment. Ah. Here."

Armed with cotton balls, a wet cloth and a small bottle of antiseptic ointment, she approached the swaying Beck. "Sit down." When then drunk woman obeyed she started to clean the dirt and blood off Beck's face carefully.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry."

"OUCH!"

"Sorry."

"Damn it fucking bleeding OUCH!"

"It serves you right for aggravating that woman, actually."

"I could have *taken* her!"

"Stop saying that!" In her irritation the tall woman patted the cotton ball down a little too hard, causing Beck to squeak like a rodent. "Sorry, I'm sorry, but you're really too much. It's true, what they say about redheads."

"What, that we're dynamite in bed?" Beck offered a cheeky grin that turned into a grimace as the antiseptic ointment was applied to her face.

"No. You have a one-track mind."

"An' I'm proud of it."

"Obviously." For apparent lack of anything else to do the tall woman began to clear the dust and debris from Beck's hair with the wet cloth. "So what did she do that made you so mad?"

"Who?"

"Troll woman." Big Sexy winced. "Excuse me. The woman you were in danger of being mauled by."

"Pfffft...."

"You could have taken her. I know. What did she do?"

Beck curled her lip into a fierce snarl. "She pissed me off."

"Yes, I comprehend that part." The other woman gave a patient sigh. "What is it that she did to piss you off?"

Suddenly Beck's bottom lip was trembling. "She fucked my girlfriend."

Tall woman's mouth formed a perfect 'o'. "Really? She... fucked... your girlfriend?" She said the word in just such a way that Beck knew it wasn't one she used often. Or at all.

"Well..." a frown crept onto the redhead's brow, "not my girlfriend. My ex. If you want to be particular about it."

Despite the fact that "particular" came out with more letters than it should have, tall woman seemed to understand. "So she slept with your ex."

Beck caught the slight hitch of the dark eyebrows and snorted, which hurt her nose. "Not much sleeping goin' on there, Big Sexy. If you're snoozing when you're fucking you're doing it all wrong. Anyway," taking the cloth from the tall woman's hands she ran it over her gritty hands, trying to get rid of the disgusting stickiness, "it wasn't her, as such."

The tall woman frowned. "Wasn't who, what?"

"Wasn't troll woman, as such. Fucking my ex." Now Beck wasn't making eye contact. Sitting back the dark woman frowned.

"I thought you said... "

"I *know* what I said, miss Dictaphony. I'm not *that* drunk. Aw shit." Throwing the cloth into a corner Beck burrowed into the corner of the couch and sulked. "She looked just like that, okay? Wanna make me think about it all over? Do you, huh? Wanna make me sad? 'Cause we're getting there, Big Sexy."

"Relax. I'm just asking. So you picked a fight with that woman because she reminded you of

someone your ex-girlfriend had slept with? Have I got that right?"

"Yup. Wanna make notes?" Beck pushed out her bottom lip like a two-year old. "It's been six months. Officially. I was gonna celebrate my six-month liberty and then that troll..." Her lip began to tremble. Shifting forward quickly the tall woman placed a hand on her knee.

"Hey. Hey. Don't. Look, I'll get you a drink. Tell me where your drinks cabinet is."

Blinking back the drunken tears Beck eyed the elegant hand lying on her leg. "Drinks *cabinet*? You crack me up, Big Sexy. Smart women are hot." Presenting the other woman with a wicked grin she leaned closer. "You'll make me feel better than alcohol any time."

The tall woman yanked her hand away. "Oh no you don't. Stop that. And stop doing that cute thing with your eyebrows."

Beck wiggled her eyebrows even more. "You think it's cute. A ha."

"Yes, it is." The tall woman blushed a scarlet red. "But just because I think you're cute doesn't mean I have to pursue any course of action. At all. Ever."

"Now you think *I'm* cute." Revelling in the tall woman's discomfort Beck shuffled forward and leaned in. "Why do you want to fight this, Big Sexy? You can't win against my pure hotness, you know? Give a girl a chance."

The tall woman shifted back in her seat. "You're completely drunk, you were in a bar brawl, and you smell like old beer."

Stopping, Beck cocked her head. "Hm. Okay. Hold on." Standing up unsteadily she held up one finger - "Wait." - before she disappeared into the bathroom. Looking around the tall woman frowned uneasily.

"Hey. I have to go."

"Wait a moment, will ya?" And then Beck came wandering back out, wearing nothing but a pair of blue boy-cut shorts. Even as the tall woman's eyes widened in surprise she couldn't help but take in the compact lean - and very naked - body appreciatively. Stopping in front of her, Beck put both hands on her hips and shrugged.

"Brushed my teeth, took off the stinky clothes, so I don't smell like beer anymore."

In spite of herself the tall woman smiled slightly. "But you still got yourself into a bar brawl. I don't approve of that."

"Yeah, so I got into a tussle." Beck frowned. "I wouldn't have if it hadn't hurt, you know?" Her mouth trembled slightly before she managed to right it into a less vulnerable state. "I just missed her, 's all."

Ill at ease with the display of defencelessness the tall woman stood, towering over Beck even as she tried not to brush against her. "Look, you seem all right. I really have to go..."

Beck looked up, hopeful, leaning in so that the tips of her nipples almost touched the tall woman's jacket. The manoeuvre almost tipped her over. "Really, Big Sexy? You *really* have to go?"

The woman's blue eyes dropped to Beck's chest involuntarily before she dragged them back up sharply. "Yes. Really. There's still the matter of you being utterly and completely drunk."

"Hmm." Beck raised her eyebrows in that way she *knew* was getting to the other woman. "Yeah. 's true. But if I'm that drunk..." and suddenly she leaned in to place a scorching kiss on the tall woman's lips. It felt as if Big Sexy was about to pull back for just a moment before her mouth opened under Beck's assault. Tangling their tongues together Beck shifted in closer and slowly ran her hands down the tall woman's hips (more to prevent herself from falling over than anything else) before she pulled back. "... if I'm that drunk I'll probably pass out soon, before you get to do something you'll regret. Right?"

A low sigh escaped from the tall woman. Her eyes were half-closed, and the look she was giving Beck was anything but unreceptive. "Right." Licking her lips she leaned closer. "We'll just make out until you pass out." She bit her bottom lip musingly. "You definitely won't be able to do anything more."

"Yup. I definitely won't." Surging forward Beck captured the other woman's mouth again with her own, and this time there was no more talking.

Oh crap. Oh lord oh lord oh lord. Oh shit.

There was something in her head. It was a mean small man with a sledgehammer, keeping rhythm with the apocalypse going on outside.

Oh shit. Oh lord.

"Make it stop."

It was a pitiful croak, but there was nobody to hear it. If Beck had been in a better state she would have thought it a good thing, because she didn't really like looking stupid in front of other people. Now, however, she was seriously considering the merits of another warm body to provide copious amounts of sympathy and pampering.

Rolling over she kicked the comforter off her legs irritably, groaning as the motion set off another cacophony in her head.

"Aaargh."

Slow movements. Slow slow slow movements.

Sliding off the bed like a drugged sloth Beck crept to the doorway and propped herself against it bonelessly. Why wasn't she in bed? Why was she slinking around? Did she have to be at work? Did she even have a job? Her aching brain let her know that she didn't care. Then her aching brain told her to go looking for aspirin. She loped to the bathroom, still off-balance, and was stopped in her wobbly, nauseating, wavering tracks by the sight of big letters written on her mirror. In lipstick.

Eileen. With a telephone number underneath it.

I'd lean too if I were that tall, her mind helpfully supplied before it seized under the sudden onset of flashbacks.

Head butting a black-haired woman while trying to get her shirt off.

Hearing "You definitely won't be able to do anything more."

One more flash of her astride the dark-haired woman, howling "Yee hah, Big Sexy!" at the top of her voice as she rode the woman's hands like a manic cowgirl.

From behind the words on the mirror a grubby organism with wild red birds' nest hair and a multitude of purple bruises on her throat - and one right over her cheekbone - stared back at Beck vacantly.

Oh shit. Oh crap. Oh truckloads.

Two hours later the handful of painkillers had kicked in, and she was feeling almost human, albeit fuzzy. Wandering through the apartment at a snail's pace, she cleaned up her fallen clothes, purposely refraining from thinking about the massive rip in her underwear, and then took a long bath. She was just falling asleep again when a reminder of an impending client jolted her from her potentially dangerous doze and had her sputtering bubbles as she clambered out of the tub and loped into the bedroom.

Pulling on the most comfortable clothing she could find she made the bed, settling for an informal "looks good from far, and far from good" style. It was as she crouched at the corner to tuck in one errant corner of the sheet that her hand brushed something foreign. It was a pink bra. Expensive, by the look of it, with fancy underwiring and a little metal pendant in the shape of an "E" right between the cups.

Eileen.

Her mind helpfully supplied a flashback of her removing the said item with her teeth, before she threatened it with whiskey and imminent extinction.

Damn. She hadn't wanted to call. She really hadn't. She wasn't going to. The sex had been hot, from what she remembered, as had the woman, but she could also remember behaving like an ass. Stuffing the bra in a drawer Beck decided that no underwear was that important. If it was, Big Sexy... Eileen... wouldn't have left it there, right? She'd throw it out, and that would be that.

"Hi, is Eileen there?"

Curse her damned traitorous fingers. Curse their little nails, their little hairs, their little...

"Please hold for professor Lascaris." The woman's voice was disapproving. Listening to the lousy keyboard music that told her she was on hold, Beck did her worst imitation of the voice silently, and then repeated it loudly to assure herself that it was as funny as she thought it was.

"Eileen Lascaris here..."

"...do hold for her highness the ... "

"Hello?"

"Oh. Sorry. Hi. It's Beck. From last night. Hello."

"Hello." There was a bit of uncomfortable silence. "How are you?"

"Meh. No lasting damage. You?"

"I'm all right, thank you."

"So ... professor, huh? What of?"

"Accounting."

"Hahahaha! Accounting, like with the accounting for your actions... hahah haa ha. Huh. You're serious."

"Yes. It's hardly a humorous topic. What is it that you do?"

"I'm a piano teacher."

"You? Piano? Funny. How do you discipline your students - call them trolls and slam their fingers in the piano lid? Ha ha ha. Huh. I suppose you're not joking either. Sorry. I didn't mean to insinuate anything."

"Hey! I didn't study li-te-ra-choore, miss brain, but even I know '*insinuating*' something doesn't mean just shrieking it out like you're my neighbour on the Jerry Springer show."

"I beg your pardon. I don't shriek."

"Uh huh. Look, let's save us both the pain here. I have your bra. Do you want it back?"

"Oh my, I didn't even ... Yes. Please. It's part of a set that Laur... yes, I'd appreciate it if you could return that. Should I meet you somewhere?"

"Well, I'm on my way out - where is your office? Can I drop it off?"

"We're on the corner of Galway and Blaze. Would you mind putting it in... you know... a bag or something?"

"I may not be a professor, but I'm not a moron, Big S... Eileen. I'll see you in 30 minutes."

The receptionist at Lascaris, Jones & Alameida was every bit as snooty as her voice implied. Giving Beck a good once-over with disapproving eyes, she nevertheless waved her through the fancy glass double doors to where Big Sexy was anxiously waiting.

In clear daylight she still looked good, although perhaps a little bookish for Beck's taste. Her long trim body was encased in an upmarket tweed suit and a pair of oblong black-rimmed glasses rounded off the look. Offering a tentative smile she stuck out a manicured hand and shook Beck's with a delicate grip.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Pushing open her door, Big Sexy waved Beck through. "Would you mind if we...?"

"Sure."

"Thank you."

Sinking into the big leather chair, Big Sexy sat back with a wary expression. "Look, about last night... I'm sorry. It shouldn't have... "

"Hey." Shrugging, Beck lifted her hands in a show of acceptance. "It was my fault. I'm sorry for anything I may have said that... well, shit, what am I saying, for the things I obviously would have said that may not have been... "

"Yes." Big Sexy nodded. "So we'll just... "

"Yeah. All good." Fishing in her pocket Beck pulled out a brown paper bag and pushed it over the desk. "Your bra. Very pretty, by the way."

The tall woman blushed beet red. "Thank you." Taking receipt of the package, she glanced inside, and then frowned. "You damaged the lace."

Raising her eyebrows incredulously, Beck instantly stuck a finger in the scarf draped haphazardly around her neck and pulled it away to reveal the myriad of blue blotches adorning her skin. "Yeah. And you damaged *me*."

Big Sexy's mouth formed a silent 'o'. "Well, it's hardly the same thing, don't you think? One would expect some sort of collateral..." Apparently noticing the way Beck's eyes glazed over she stopped suddenly and shrugged. "Nevertheless."

A pretty red convertible pulled up outside, diverting Beck's already ailing attention. When the car door opened and a pair of tanned shapely legs slipped out, she craned her neck to see past Big Sexy, who frowned and turned around to see what was distracting Beck.

"Beck, I'm talking to ... OH **SHIT**." Grabbing the paper bag hastily Big Sexy shoved it into her top drawer.

Struggling to look away from the gorgeous blonde who had just exited the cute little car, Beck raised an eyebrow at Big Sexy. "What?"

"Laura." Sexy was flustered. Getting up she scooted around the desk. "My girlfriend."

Both of Beck's eyebrows shot into her hairline. "Oh? *Girlfriend* girlfriend or ex like my girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend! Shit!" Opening the door Big Sexy peered down the corridor. "Get up. Get up get up get up! You have to go!"

Standing up slowly Beck took another long look at the blonde who was approaching the building with a delightfully languid walk. "You cheated on *her* with **me**? You have some impressive issues, Big Sexy!"

"Can we not discuss this now?" Frantically Big Sexy peered down the hallway again, and now they could both hear the receptionist talking to the blonde. "Shit. Shit! Listen," and she approached Beck with panic in her eyes. "I told her that I was visiting with an old college friend last night. Same details, different ending. Alright? We went to college together. You were feeling melancholy, I checked up on you. Okay?"

Scowling up at Big Sexy Beck sneered. "You told her I went to the same college as *you*? Fuck it, Big Sexy! That's **never** going to work in a million fucking years!"

Sexy's blue eyes were as big as saucers. "Just this one thing. For me. *Please*, Beck. Please!"

The blonde was approaching the office. They could hear her heels clicking on the tiles. With a sigh Beck sank into the chair. "It's never gonna work. But fine. Fine."

"Thank you." And then Big Sexy was at the door, pushing it fully open to effusively greet the woman entering. "Hello, darling! What a wonderful surprise - I thought you would be resting after your trip."

"I was planning on it, but then I realised that I'd forgotten to give you the draft I'd been working on, so rather than e-mail it I decided to drop by myself. Oh, I'm sorry - I'm not interrupting, am I?"

It was probably her cue to turn around. Getting up, Beck faced the woman ... and nearly spat out something wholly inappropriate. Laura was gorgeous. Mind-numbingly awe-inspiringly jaw-droppingly stunning. A mane of finely layered honey-blonde hair framed a heart-shaped face with delicate cheekbones and a dainty pointed chin. From underneath perfectly arched eyebrows two smoky-brown almond eyes peered out at her, and when they crinkled at the corners in a pleasant smile Beck nearly keeled over. Jumping into the almost-silence hurriedly Big Sexy introduced them.

"Laura, this is the college friend I was telling you about this morning... Beck... "

Realising that the pause meant something bad, Beck jumped in. "Beck. Rebecca Jarvis. Very nice to meet you."

"Wow, it's really fantastic to meet you too, Rebecca. Laura Miller." Leaning closer Laura took Beck's hand and squeezed it firmly. The sweet smile curling around her full lips was almost the death of the redhead. "I'm very glad to hear that you and Eileen finally connected again."

Fielding a sudden coughing fit, Beck removed her hand from the cool grip and covered her face as well as she could, avoiding Big Sexy's stern glare. "Yeah, yeah, me too. It's always nice to ... connect ... with... people..."

"Are you alright?" Patting Beck's shoulder with concern Laura bent slightly to take a closer look at her bruised cheekbone. "Gosh, that looks painful."

"It's ... mfffff.... okay...." Shifting away from the faint smell of perfume and the woman who was so alluring she could have been the devil right then, Beck grimaced at Sexy.

"There there." Stepping between Beck and Laura, Big Sexy delivered a smack to the redhead's back, probably slightly harder than was strictly necessary. Shooting an apologetic look at Laura, Sexy shrugged. "She's probably feeling a little rough from last night."

Beck shared an upside-down glare with Big Sexy. "Yeah. Rough." For which she promptly got another smack on the back. Straightening up she pushed the trigger-happy hand away and

attempted a few deep breaths, trying very hard to behave. "Sorry. Something in my throat."

Laura reached out to her girlfriend. "Eileen? Why don't you get Rebecca a glass of water?"

Squeezing Laura's hand Big Sexy shrugged. "I'd rather not leave her alone in the ... emotional state... she's in. Won't you please fetch a bottle of mineral water from Agnetha? I'll..." Pat pat pat to Beck's shoulder. "... I'll keep an eye on her."

Once Laura had disappeared the tall woman turned sharply and stared daggers at Beck. "What was that? All I'm expecting from you is to nod and smile! Is that too demanding?"

"You cheated on **her** with *me*? Fuck." Shaking her head Beck loped over to the chair and plonked down in it. "Sorry. The whole gorgeous thing floored me. And the 'getting into contact' shit. I'll try harder. Mistress."

"I don't think you're funny, Beck. And we're talking about the continued existence of my relationship here, so try *significantly* harder."

"Yeah yeah. Bring it on."

When Laura returned a much calmer scene met her. Beck sat quietly in the chair, apparently listening as Big Sexy talked about some or other nerdy college adventure. Passing the bottle to Beck, who took it with quiet thanks and a smile, Laura perched on a corner of the desk. When Big Sexy had finished her girlfriend shot a questioning glance at Beck.

"Were you there too, that night?"

Beck's eyebrows jumped of their own volition. "Errrr..."

"She was, but she wouldn't remember. She was drunk." Smiling sweetly at Laura, Sexy shrugged. "Beck was a bit of a drinker."

With a glower at Big Sexy Beck nodded. "That's me. A *drinker*."

"Okay." Pushing herself off the desk, Laura stood up and beamed down at Beck. "There are so many stories I'm just dying to hear. I can't wait to get together for a bit of gossip." Approaching Big Sexy she gave the other woman a quick peck on the lips. "Anyway, I do have to go, but ... Rebecca, would you like to have dinner with us tonight?"

"Oh..." Beck looked to Big Sexy for help.

"Honey, wouldn't you rather just have the small gathering? You must still be jetlagged."

"Nonsense." Laura shook her head. "Pierce, Lyndall and Frederick will be coming already. I'd love to have Rebecca there too." Turning the full force of her gaze on Beck, she arched her eyebrows imploringly. "Please?"

Beck's intention was to say no. Every cell in her body screamed the right answer, and if she'd missed those, Big Sexy was on hand to share her special patented mean glower. And yet, her larynx had followed the route of her damned traitorous fingers, all at the request of a beautiful mouth.

What she wanted to say was "No thank you. I have something already planned, and though it pains me greatly I must unfortunately turn down your invitation." Or something of the sort.

Instead, what came out was "Okay." Not even something more impressive. Just a squeaked "okay" without charm or flair.

"Thank you." Once again Laura squeezed her hand before she bestowed the full force of her smile on Big Sexy. "All right, honey, I'll see you at home. Have a great day."

They listened as she walked down the hallway - click click click click - as she spoke to Agnetha - so nice to see you again, how was your trip? - and as she walked outside and slid gracefully into her cute little convertible. And then Sexy turned back to Beck.

"What the hell was that?"

"Don't you *dare* shout at me, Big Sexy."

"You should have said no!"

"It would have been fucking rude!"

"That's hardly the least of your problems, Beck, and besides which, what with you cursing like a sailor I hardly pegged you as concerned about your image."

"You'd be swearing too if you were about to humiliate yourself at a dinner party with people who have names like Lyndall and Pierce! I don't even know *which* college I went to. We're probably not even close enough in age to have gone to the same college! So do forgive me if I drop in the occasional fucking swearword for emphasis!"

Poking her head out of the door, Big Sexy peered down the hallway. "Keep your voice down. You're going to give Agnetha a heart attack."

"Serves her fucking right for having a name like that and then not even having the decency to be Swedish."

Sexy's eyebrows rose into a demonstrably disapproving position, but her mouth was trembling suspiciously. At Beck's suspicious look she tried to maintain her composure, but it only took a few seconds for the veneer to crack and a sidesplitting laugh to escape from her throat. Out of pure relief Beck began to laugh too. They cackled for a while like old friends, and then Sexy wiped her eyes with a last hiccup of giggles.

Sniffing a little Beck wiped her nose. "But really, Big Sexy - *Agnetha*? And your friends are actually called Pierce and Lintball?"

"Lyndall."

"Mine's better. Do you have any friends called Gandalf or Abernathy?"

"Not that I can recall, but I do sometimes fall asleep during conversations."

"Funny. What the hell are we going to do, Big Sexy? I can't hold a conversation with any of your friends if they're anything like you. No offence."

"None taken. Look, you're not going to have to. Just don't arrive tonight. I'll tell Laura you called and cancelled."

Beck pondered. "All right. But please don't tell her I'm drunk, okay?"

"Will you be?"

"Ha ha. Haaaa. What a wonderful time for your magnificent fucking sense of humour to make its reappearance. Just ... be nice, okay?"

"Of course." Big Sexy nodded reassuringly. "That should be the end of it, then."

"Longest one-night stand I ever had." Getting to her feet Beck exited, squeezing Big Sexy's hand as she passed her. "And by the way, thank you for last night. For saving my ass."

The smile on Sexy's face was wry. "Sure. It was a cute ass to save. Though I have it on good authority that you could have taken her. It may even have been the truth - you're pretty feisty."

"Aw, you're sweet. But she would have pasted my cute ass all over the walls." Checking to make sure that Agnetha wasn't watching, Beck leaned forward and kissed Sexy on the cheek. "Take care, Big Sexy."

Fate is a great friend to some people. Everything happens just perfectly for them. They win the lottery, have extra-ordinarily white teeth, don't ever have pigeons poop on their heads and have babies that are cute even when they've just been born.

To others... not so much.

Beck always thought that she fell into the first category. She hadn't won the lottery, or had a pretty baby, but pigeons didn't poop on her and her teeth were pretty damned impressive.

And then, in the Quick-E-Mart downtown, shopping for nachos and instant mash, Fate showed

her how wrong she was. Beck ran into Laura Miller. Literally. The trolley hit Laura's ankles with a thud and she almost immediately turned around, already limping, already starting an angry sentence...

"Ow! Can't you watch where you're going? I'll ... Beck?"

Grinning sheepishly Beck did a stupid cheerful little munchkin wave that she'd wish for months afterwards she could erase. "Hi Laura. I'm really sorry."

Lifting one foot Laura rubbed at the heel, but her frown was gone. "If you needed to get my attention there are nicer ways."

"Yeah, but I'm not especially nice. Are you okay?"

"I'll live. You're lethal with a trolley."

"I've only got my learners. Don't tell store security."

Laura laughed, her clear voice causing a few people to turn around for a look, and her sheer exquisiteness causing quite a number of those to do a double take. "Other than the fact that you nearly amputated me at the ankles, it's lovely to see you."

"Same here." *You're lovely to see.* "I'm very sorry that I couldn't make the dinner party."

"Well, it really wasn't your fault. Are you feeling better?"

Bloody Big Sexy. Clearing her throat Beck tried to look as if she knew exactly what had been wrong with her. "Oh. Yes. Much, thank you. I just had to sleep it off."

With a little raise of the eyebrow Laura nodded. "That's a very ... holistic approach to bladder infection, but I suppose if it works for you..."

"That bloody woman..." It was meant to be a cantankerous mutter for her own ears, but Laura was doing something outrageous - she was actually listening. When she cocked her head in enquiry Beck cleared her throat with real embarrassment. "I meant... well, I didn't want her to tell anyone that. It's personal." She never was any good with stopping before she said something stupid, and today was not going to be her first try. Especially when a honey-haired goddess stood in front of her, waiting. "It's... er... it's the drinking."

Rebecca Jarvis, roll call for Idiot 101. Stick up your hand if you've just shot yourself in the foot. And please do go ahead and finish yourself off, while the most gorgeous woman you've ever met watches. The stage is yourrrrrrrs.

"Look, Laura, between me and Big... Eileen we're accidentally kind of making it look like I'm an alcoholic of some sort, and I'm not, I'm really not. I don't want you to think that, which you might, considering that I'm still talking about it. Which I can't seem to stop. So I'm going to stop

now. I really am, 'cause now it kind of sounds like I've been hitting the bottle, doesn't it?
Shutting up without delay."

Instead of running in the opposite direction screaming hysterically, Laura Miller was smiling. Leaning forward she grasped Beck's arm lightly. "Hey, we all have our problems. I just don't think you should be mixing the drinking and the pills."

"What? *What did your girlfriend tell you?!*"

The almond-shaped eyes were twinkling. Shooting Beck a wide smile, Laura patted her shoulder. "Actually, now I'm just messing with you."

"You..." Mutely Beck grabbed a roll of toilet paper and threw it at Laura, who ducked it adroitly. Trying to avoid the gaze of the old lady behind her who was glancing around, puzzled about the sudden drizzle of toilet rolls, the redhead smacked the blonde lightly in the arm. "You're killing me here, woman!"

"I'm sorry." Laughing, Laura evaded the second smack. "You were just so serious. I couldn't help myself."

"Try."

"Sorry." The corners of her lovely mouth were still twitching, but she was managing to get herself back under control. "It's such a pity that you couldn't come. It would have been a lot more fun if you'd been there."

Beck raised both eyebrows. "Oh? But Pierce sounds like a whole heap of fun."

"Ah. That answers my next question, which would have been whether you'd met any of them. Obviously not." Bending to pick up the forlorn toilet roll Laura tossed it back into Beck's trolley. "They're fine. Nice people, really. But they're all Eileen's friends, and half of the time I have no idea what they're talking about."

"Knowing Eileen, I think I can understand what you mean. Sorry, I have no idea what it is that you do, Laura."

"Well, I'm in advertising." Laura indicated towards the till with her head. "Shall we? Are you finished?"

"Yeah, sure." Pushing her trolley after Laura, Beck concentrated very hard to not to hit the blonde again. "What do you do in advertising?"

"I write jingles."

"Seriously?" Jogging a little the redhead caught up with Laura. "Like what?"

"Well..." Laura thought for a moment. "I did the 'Ruby Toothpaste' one. You know..." She began to hum, but before she was even two notes in Beck was singing along loudly.

"Hel-lo, Ruby Toothpaste, tastes as fresh as morning dew, shine my teeth with every new day... Yeah, I know that one."

Raising an eyebrow Laura stopped and turned to Beck. "You don't like it. I can hear it."

Beck shrugged. "Ms Miller, I can't like **both** the Stones *and* the toothpaste jingle. One of them has to be the root of all evil. Anyway, I've made up my own rude words for the ad so I actually love watching it. What else have you done?"

Laughing, Laura began to walk again. "You say it like you mean '*what have you done!*'" She stopped for a moment at the candy aisle and took a chocolate bar off the shelf, apparently reading its ingredients before she plopped it back down. "So what words did you make up?"

"I'm not telling. I don't even know you. Now tell me what other ads."

"I see. How is it fair play for you to demand information from me but refuse me the information I want?"

"Well, yours is a matter of public record, and mine are a matter of personal enjoyment." Noticing the old lady who had been besieged by toilet rolls earlier shuffling by and giving her an odd look at her words, Beck shrugged. "We're categorically *not* talking about porn, ma'am." They both watched with muffled amusement as the old lady suddenly began moving a lot faster, and in a very different direction, and then they continued towards the till. "And besides, if you don't tell me I'll just ask Big... Eileen."

Stopping again, Laura turned to look at Beck. "That's a few times now you've done that - call her Big Eileen."

"It's not... well, her nickname used to be Big. I just keep forgetting not to use it."

The blonde's smoky eyes twinkled. "If she doesn't have a problem with it then you can really call her that. It's kind of cute. I never would have pegged her as someone who had a nickname of any kind at any time. At all."

Beck shrugged. "She didn't have a choice. So there's my massive secret. I call your girlfriend Big. Now - what other jingles?"

"Oh fine. No skin off my nose. It's public record, as you say. I did..." A moment of silence as she thought, "... I did the Beulah the Cow ad for A-moozing Milk."

"Ping-pong-diddly ding pinga pinga moo..." Making up the words for the instrumental tune as she went, Beck nodded. "That one's fun. What else?"

"Hmmm. The 'James, I'll drive myself today' one with the butler and the red limousine."

"That one with the screaming guitars and the great drum beat?" When Laura smiled, Beck nodded approvingly. "Now that I like. Good for you."

"Well, thank you. The exorbitant payment from the client was nice, but of course your approval means everything to me." Laura offered Beck a grin.

"Excuse me? Did you just sass me?"

"Is there actually a word like 'sass'?"

"Don't try to evade the question, Miss Miller. Here I'm thinking that you're sweet, and all the time such evil lurks under that loveliness. You're just a bastion of depravity."

"Ooh. Depravity." Unpacking the few things in her basket onto the counter, Laura nodded. "That's just the word I was looking for. My next toothpaste jingle is set to John Mayer's 'Gravity'." While the bored young girl behind the till scanned her items Laura began to sing in a clear pleasant voice. "A cavity... a cavity is working against me... a cavity wants to bring me down... depravity... cavity stay away from me... "

With a shake of her head Beck smiled. "You're no jingle writer. You're a murderer of good music."

"Technically, if I'm getting paid for it, I'm a mercenary." Thanking the cashier with a smile Laura began to pack the bags in the trolley, then turned. "Listen, Beck, why don't you come over for drinks and lunch on Saturday?"

There was no Big Sexy to help Beck. She opened her mouth and then closed it audibly. She could see Laura's mouth twitch as the blonde watched her response - or lack thereof.

"Please."

Oh lordy. That single simple word was the undoing of Beck. How could she refuse? Sighing, she nodded. With a grin Laura leaned over and patted her arm with satisfaction.

"Great. I'll be in the studio murdering music until about twelve, but if you want to come over earlier and lounge by the poolside with Eileen you're most welcome to. Do you have the address?" At Beck's reply in the negative she pulled out a business card and jotted something down on it. "Here you go."

"What can I bring?"

"Your conversation will do. Excellent! I have to go - I've just realised that I'm hopelessly late - but I look forward to seeing you on Saturday. Bye, Beck!"

And then she was off, a vision of loveliness scooting across the road in her faded jeans, leaving Beck to wonder where her own brain had gone.

Big Sexy didn't waste any time in asking the same question. "What the hell were you thinking?!"

"I wasn't, obviously! You know how I get!" Realising that this was a very silly argument that wasn't working in her favour, Beck tried again. "She just asked me! Just like that! I didn't have time to formulate a neat little plan with all sorts of bells and whistles - I just had to agree! Besides, you know what she's like. It's hard to say no to her!"

Reaching for the martini at the foot of her reclined chair, Big Sexy popped the straw between her lips and took an irritated sip. It annoyed Beck even more than she already was to find that the scene tempted her somewhat. Big Sexy was bookish, but she was also very attractive. Those lips, folded around a pink stripy straw... Clearing her throat Beck decided to ignore herself. She was just trouble anyway.

"Well, the point is that I said yes. Hence me sitting here drinking a martini at ... what, 11 in the morning?"

"It's the stress."

"Yeah, and the next thing I know Laura comes walking in here and sees me sitting with a drink at eleven in the morning, and the whole alcohol thing gets dragged up again. I have a bone to pick with you about that, by the way."

Lowering the straw Sexy raised an eyebrow. "Can we focus on the immediate issues at hand, please?"

"Huh. And you selling me to your girlfriend as an alcoholic isn't an immediate issue. Fine." Sipping her drink Beck glared at the other woman over the rim of her glass. "So you'd better give me a few facts, Big, if you don't want me to make a complete ass of myself and take you down with me in the process."

"I don't know why you couldn't just have turned her down."

It was a mutter, but Beck heard it. "I don't know why you couldn't just have turned **me** down! It's not like I'm the fucking cat's whiskers! Now shut up and give me some information!"

"I can't do both."

"Don't be a smartass!"

Sighing, Big Sexy put down her glass. "Fine. I went to Saint Joseph's College from 1983 to 1989. I was also on the national tennis team that last year. I played one match in the Davis Cup

and broke my ankle. My doctoral thesis was entitled "Piercing the Corporate Veil: a study of... "

"Whoa there, Miss Information. Even if I knew you back then I'd never be able to remember anything about your thesis, so let's skip the boring details. Who were you bonking back then?"

"Bonking?"

"I know you know about bonking, Big Sexy. Your incapability to refuse offers of bonking is what got us here in the first place."

"What does my ...bonking ... have to do with anything?"

"That's the shit people actually want to hear, Big. Jeez, you're hopeless. So. The bonking?"

"Hm." Clearing her throat Big Sexy glared at Beck for a moment before she continued. "1984 to 1985, Pamela Gooding. Tall athletic brunette. 1985 to 1986, Emily Camp. Tall athletic blonde. 1986, briefly, Jack Paine.... "

"Wait. Short for Jacqueline?"

"No. Jack was a man. I had an identity crisis."

"You're telling me."

"Don't even start. Jack Paine, painter and sculptor. Big and dark. 1987 to 1989, Pamela Gooding."

"Same one?"

"Same one. She got this lovely tattoo of a dove on her... Anyway, that's the lot. What else?"

"Where was that tattoo?"

"It's personal, Beck."

"Fine. I'll make it up as I go along."

"Oh God."

"Ooh." Raising her eyebrows Beck smirked. "I can't remember much of that night, but you saying those words certainly brought up a flashback."

A flush suffused Big Sexy's face. "I am going to drink my martini, and very likely have another, and hope that by the time Laura arrives I'm sufficiently drunk not to notice how much of a fiasco this is going to be."

"Oh ye of little faith." Finishing her own drink Beck held out the empty glass to Sexy. "It'll be just fine. Of course, after that I'd appreciate it if I could maybe stop starring in the fucking 'Bold and the Beautiful', if you don't mind."

"Don't think for one moment that I'm loving all of this, either." Big Sexy treated Beck to a fierce scowl, which wasn't quite enough to stop the redhead from openly studying her long linen-clad legs as she walked towards the bar. Glancing back Big Sexy caught Beck's appreciative look. "Beck! Stop doing that! You're an incorrigible leech."
"It's just a little appreciation, woman. You have good legs. Deal with it. Now pour the damned drinks."

"Martinis at this time of the morning?" Yes, Beck's nightmare had come true. Obviously. Laura was standing in the doorway, her eyebrows arched with something that Beck *really* hoped was amusement.

Struggling up from the reclining chair, Beck threw her hands in the air. "Hey, it's not my fault. It is honestly, categorically, utterly and wholly not my fault. I am **not** turning your girlfriend into an alcoholic. She started it." Aware that the last sentence came out sounding painfully juvenile she changed direction. "Hi Laura."

Breaking into that smile that made Beck's knees wobble, Laura nodded at her. "Hi Beck. I believe you. Take a breath."

"Hi Laura." Big Sexy sounded every bit as guilty as Beck had. They gave the impression of two children who had just been very *very* bad. Grinning a little, Laura sauntered over to Sexy.

"Hey baby." Stretching onto her toes she gave Big Sexy a quick kiss. "Did you remember to put the chicken in the oven?"

The answer was evident by the sudden flush flooding Sexy's face. "Erm... no... um, I was talking to Beck and..."

Beck was quick to jump in. "It's still not my fault. Categorically, utterly and otherwise. I didn't do it."

This was greeted by Big Sexy's patented glare. "Thanks a lot, Rebecca. You're tremendous."

"Now now." Holding out her hands Laura stopped them both. "The two of you are like squabbling kids. I can't leave you alone together."

Sexy's eyebrows shot up. "No, you can! You definitely can! We don't get up to..."

The mutter from Beck was loud enough to carry. "Shut up, Big. Shut up **right now**."

Shaking her head Laura looked from one woman to the other. "Ooooookay. I'll leave you to mud-wrestle, or whatever it is you're going to do, while I start lunch. I'll be back in thirty minutes or

so. Weirdoes."

Both women admired her figure until she disappeared into the house, before Big Sexy walked back to her chair and passed Beck her drink. The redhead looked at the tall woman sardonically.

"Way to almost blow it, Einstein. You're really stupid for a smart girl."

"I panicked, okay?"

"Then take a sip of that drink in your hand, please. I feel like a rat on a sinking ship."

"Rat is an apt word."

"Shut up and drink, Big Sexy."

By the time lunch was prepared, a few things had been established:

1. Big Sexy was prone to sniggering when nervous and tipsy.
2. Laura was a great cook.
3. Beck shouldn't have had that third martini.

Nevertheless, it was a delightful affair. Pardon the choice of words. While Big Sexy tried her very best not to say anything, Laura and Beck again found it easy to make conversation.

"So what were you working on today, Laura?"

"A jingle for an insurance company. Instrumental, and not too bad, if I say so myself."

"So no massacre of popular music today?"

"No. You'll have to wait a while to hear my Leona Lewis cover."

"Which is?"

"'Bleeding gums'."

"Oh, you kill me. Slowly."

"I was saving that one especially for you."

Very little mention of college had come up during dinner, mostly due to Beck's managing to deflect any of it. Nevertheless, by the end of the event Big Sexy was such a ball of nerves that

she felt the need to sneak off to her office. Once Beck had noticed that she apparently wasn't coming back from the bathroom, she turned to the blonde with a nonplussed expression. Laura, however, wasn't overly concerned.

"She's balancing the chequebook. Eileen does that when she's anxious, or drunk. Being drunk usually makes her anxious."

"Oh." Beck finished the last bite of dessert. "Erm... I'll get out of your hair, then. I'm sure you have things to do."

"No, please stay." Stacking the plates Laura took them back into the kitchen, talking as she fussed. "That is, if you're not off to do something. And if you want to, of course. If you don't mind being stuck with me."

I'd pay good money to be stuck on.... Editing thoughts. Editing thoughts. Editing thoughts.

"Sure." *Was that a squeak? Did I just squeak? Puberty, puberty, call waiting for puberty.* Clearing her throat Beck tried to be nonchalant. "I could hang around for a while. That would be nice."

"It would be. Would you like some coffee?"

"Sounds good."

They migrated back outside to the familiar reclining chairs with their steaming cups. Attempting to avoid bringing up Big Sexy at all costs, Beck found herself saying a lot more about her life than she had ever intended. Laura was a good listener, knowing when to interject with humour to break the ice, and knowing when to stay quiet. She laughed in all the right places when Beck told her about her disastrous first lesson where she broke four of her major benefactor's fingers by accidentally dropping the lid of the piano on his hands. She didn't laugh at all when Beck told of the girlfriend who sent a bailiff to remove everything in the apartment after she moved out, even though Beck tried to make it sound as funny as possible to make herself look less pathetic.

In turn, Beck managed to get Laura to talk about herself a little more, too. She learned that Laura was the youngest of three, that her parents were disappointed that she was gay and that she wasn't in a medical field like both of her siblings and that she'd given up a lucrative modelling career for her music. Beck learned that when Laura was funny she was terrific, and when she was serious she was even better. And Beck learned that it probably wasn't a good idea to talk to Laura so much.

Yeah, Jarvis. Why don't you just hit on her? Tell her you fucked her girlfriend and now you're falling head over heels for her. Worse things have worked. Women love that kind of thing. Not.

When it became late Beck excused herself with as much good grace as she could muster. They took a detour past Big Sexy's office, and found her sleeping soundly facedown on a complex-looking ledger. The ostensibly fresh red pen markings would probably leave a few unwanted

designs on her skin, but she was snoring lightly in such an untroubled way that both Beck and Laura giggled and decided to tiptoe out quickly rather than wake her.

Outside, they had one of those awkward goodbyes. Beck spent a few seconds dancing around like a largely confused boxer, trying to make up her mind whether she would hug the other woman or chance a quick peck on the cheek. Finally there was a quick hug and a quick peck, and then a quick getaway from a particularly guilty party.

That night, brushing her shoulder-length red hair repeatedly for no particular reason (in fact, she sometimes completely left off brushing it in the morning, simply gathering it together and tying it with the closest hair band) Beck ruminated.

Okay, if she'd been Big Sexy she would have ruminated. Being Beck, she just thought some.

Had one-night stand with Big Sexy. Okay, that wasn't really my fault, considering I didn't know about her relationship, but that argument won't even fly with a two-year old, much less Laura.

Lied to Laura. Now we're on shaky ground. Still - wasn't my fault. Big Sexy made me do it. Nevertheless, morally wrong. Oh so wrong. As wrong as sleeping with her girlfriend? Ugh. Don't compare two evils, Beck, you're still coming up short on the other end.

Fell hard for Laura. This one Big Sexy had nothing to do with. Well, actually if she hadn't started the whole thing I never would have met Laura and then... Beck. Don't shift the blame. Denial's an ugly thing.

So now what? I'm trying to get the whole thing behind me, but it keeps cropping up.

I can't see them again. I can't keep lying.

I want to see Laura again.

Best reason not to.

I've got to talk to Big Sexy. We've got to stop this.

Ouch! Snarl! Stupid freaking brush! Take that!

Did I just break my lamp?

Crap. Crappity crappity crap.

The torture was excruciating. However, Beck was not especially good at taking action. She was

an authority on procrastination, and her argument was that it was too late in the game to change her area of expertise.

In this instance, her approach just wasn't working that well. Karma was being, for lack of a better word, a bitch. However hard Beck would try not to run into Laura, somehow she always did. A quick reconnaissance at the non-local supermarket would instantly become an embarrassed apology at once again having rammed into Laura's feet. A quick outing to the park found Laura jogging by, and the jogging with the sweatiness and the little outfit and the healthy glow... well, it just wasn't all that healthy for Beck. She found Laura in bookstores, music shops, coffee shops, and cinema foyers. And everywhere Beck found her, she tried to make a short but nice excuse and leave.

She tried to.

Oh, how she tried.

But it only took one crinkle of those smoky brown eyes and a hint of perfect white teeth and her resolve crumbled. She *liked* the woman, damn it. And that was the worst damned part of the whole damned mess.

Behold what a disaster zone Laura turns the normally stalwart Beck into:

"Beck? Hey, Beck!"

"Wha? Erm... Hi Laura. How are you?"

"I'm great, thanks. What are you doing here?"

"Here? What, in a shop?"

"You live on the other side of town, Beck."

"Oh. Right. Um. Well, this store carries a special item that I can't buy there. On my side of town."

"What?"

"What??"

"What what?"

"You said what first."

"I know. I'm just having fun with you. What *item*, Beck?"

"Oh. Erm. This?"

"You say it like there's a question mark at the end of that sentence."

"Eh? I mean eh. No. This. It's a statement. I'm talking about this."

"Toilet paper?"

"Yes, the toil... Oh crap. Hahahahaaa. Sorry. I like the puppy print."

"Don't you get puppy prints on toilet paper on your side of town?"

"No. We only get the plain and I get bored quickly. I'm going to stop the conversation now. I have a suspicion that it's about to get very bad."

"Too late, she cried. Okay, Beck, you're obviously having a moment with your toilet paper. I'll leave you to it. Nice to see you."

"Yeah, you too, Laura. Very nice. Sorry about the toilet paper. Okay. Bye. Um. Laura? Can I buy you coffee? Crap."

"With that kind of charm, how can I possibly resist?"

Oh, how she tried

The thing is, even if Laura hadn't been perfect, Beck never would have known. The blonde hair may have been a little clichéd for some, but every time the redhead saw it shimmer in the sun, her stomach flipped right over. Those almond eyes may perhaps have been slightly too exotic for ordinary tastes, but when they crinkled at the corners in absolute amusement Beck couldn't care less about ordinary. The sense of humour may have been a little sharp for some, but it always hit just the right chord in Beck. Laura's lips may have been too curved for some, her chest may have been too flat for some, her laugh may have been too untamed for some, but there was absolutely nothing about her that Beck could hold onto to put herself off.

And it was only really when Beck sat, one night, going through every little motion, every little head toss, every little twitch to find something she truly and completely disliked - that she realised she actually *knew* every head toss, every motion, every twitch.

Oh yeah. Rebecca Jarvis was officially in trouble.

"Lascaris, Jones & Alameida."

"I need to speak to Eileen. Urgently."

"Please hold for *Professor* Lascaris."

"Blah blah blah, Agnetha. I'm not buying into ... Oh great. Girl from Ipanema. Will not think of person who rewrites music. Will not. Where is that bloody Big Sexy? Sorry. *Professor* Big Sexy. Hmmm, has a hot ring to it... *That when she passes, each one she passes goes aaah, ooh, but he watches so sadly... how can he tell her he loves her ... Stupid stupid stupid song. Aaaah... ooooohh..."*

"Hello?"

"Big Sexy?"

"What?"

*Sexy?"

"Excuse me??"

"Eileen?"

"No, this is Agnetha. Professor Lascaris is unfortunately not available at the moment. Can I take a message?"

"I don't know. Can you?"

"*I will tell Professor you called.*"

"But you don't even know who I ... hello?"

Finally Beck resorted to *something drastic*. This is not to be confused with the grand gesture. A grand gesture would imply buying flowers and hanging from the Eiffel Tower proclaiming your love to Laura in bad French iambic pentameter without caring that Big Sexy is going to beat fifty kinds of tar out of you and make you do a tax return while she does it. Something drastic leans more towards packing your cat and your piano and moving to another country in the middle of the night. And Beck didn't have a cat (that she could remember), so something more suitable would have to do.

Shifting nervously from foot to foot she rang the doorbell. She wasn't going to make a fuss. She was going to tell Big Sexy that this needed to stop, that they needed to invent a massive fight or something (or she'd been hit by a bomb and was completely and utterly dead. And then she'd have to move), and that they needed to make up a good reason why contact would from now on

be limited. Restricted. Verboten.

"Hi Beck."

Argh. Theoretically, Beck's tongue fell out of her mouth and ambulated down the sidewalk. In practice she looked mentally impeded. "Oh, hi Laura. I'm... Nice to see you. Is Eileen here?"

"No. She's gone to a two-day conference. 'The impact of the rising inflation rate on the cost of something or other'. It sounds mind-numbingly boring, but she gets all giddy about it. Want to come in for a drink?"

"Erm." Beck was searching desperately for a good excuse (not involving pot roast, her elderly aunt, or toilet paper) when Laura suddenly reached forward and grasped her hand.

"Listen, Beck, are you okay? You seem a little distracted lately. Anything you want to talk about?"

"Hph." Now she was completing the idiot look effectively by choking on her own spit. Coughing a little she leaned forward and propped her hands on her knees, wiling her eyes not to water. The feel of Laura's hand rubbing her back was torture and bliss at the same time. Waiting until she felt she had *something* under control Beck finally straightened up, clearing her throat. "Sorry. No, I'm fine. Really. Totally okay."

"Right." Eyeing her dubiously Laura took her hand again and pulled her through the doorway. "Let's have that drink."

It was going quite well when Beck stood clear on the other side of the kitchen as Laura rummaged through the drinks cabinet, even if Laura's shirt lifted slightly at the back to show off creamy skin and Beck nearly whinnied like a pony.

It was going well when Laura passed a tumbler to Beck, and their fingers didn't touch. Almost didn't, really. Just a light brush. Very light. Nothing to dwell on.

It was still going well when Laura leaned against the counter next to Beck, but not too close, and took a sip of her drink.

It wasn't going all that well when Laura licked her lips, suddenly looked up and found Beck staring at her mouth with a stupid expression that could only mean one stupid thing.

Things were rapidly getting worse when Laura didn't have the common effing decency to look away.

Things got atrocious round about the time when Rebecca Jarvis muttered "fuck it" and leaned forward and kissed Laura Miller.

And the wheels came off completely when Laura Miller kissed her back.

"Shit!" Trying to tear herself away from the warm wonderful mouth under hers Beck shuffled backwards, but her traitorous lips wouldn't obey. She ended up propped against Laura at the lips, butt sticking out absurdly like she was auditioning for the role of a tea tray. Finally, the blonde woman stepped back so sharply that Beck ended up face-first on the floor. "Ow!"

"Sorry. Sorry. I... " Laura looked bewildered. "I can't do this."

"I beg to differ. You're actually quite good at ... " Dragging herself up against the kitchen cabinet Beck shrugged helplessly. "Maybe not the best time to joke about it. Sorry."

"There's Eileen, and I... This isn't right."

"It was my fault."

"No, it was mine. You should go, Beck."

"Laura... "

"Beck, you should go."

"Yeah. I should probably go."

When Beck went back to the house three days later she made sure to stealthily stake it out for at least an hour, hiding behind her sunglasses and oversized fishing cap, watching as Laura got into the car and drove away, before she sneaked to the front door and rang the bell, wondering if she was about to be beaten severely. When Big Sexy opened the door the little redhead was - peculiarly - leaning away from her, and warily watching her every move.

Raising a dubious eyebrow Sexy shrugged. "Hello, Beck. Do you want to come in, or would you like to sway out here for a while?"

"Funny. Ha." Beck squeezed past the taller woman, into the house. "We really **really** need to talk, Big Sexy."

"O-kay. You smell like beer."

"That's because I was drinking beer. Gee golly, you're a CSI squad all on your own."

"Gee golly, someone's in a stinky mood. And I don't just mean the beer. What's going on?"

"Well, look, it's like this." Taking a deep breath Beck paused, and then marched on into the kitchen.

Following her in confusion Big Sexy shook her dark head. "What **are** you doing?"

"I need a drink." Taking a glass from the cabinet Beck cocked her head. "You?"

"Too early for me, Beck. What's going on?"

"Never too early for disaster, Big Sexy." Shrugging, Beck poured herself a stiff shot of whiskey and downed it in one. "Gaawwwwwww. That's **disgusting**."

"Then why are you pouring another one?"

"I'm a masochist. Get off my back, will ya?"

"Fine." In a move that seemed much too casual for her, Big Sexy leveraged herself up onto the counter and crossed her long legs. "Jeez, Beck, what's the problem? And why are you dressed like Gonzo?"

"You know," the redhead tossed the floppy hat and sunglasses on the counter, and then with one quick motion threw back the second shot, blinking as her eyes began to water, "I'm just having a very tough week, Big Sexy, and this whole you and me and Laura thing is getting to me. And I mean *really* getting to me. I want out, Big. I want out **now**. Otherwise you're forcing me to buy a cat and stop eating ice cream - and I don't even like cats that much. Okay?"

"What?" Leaning forward, Sexy frowned. "You're babbling. Look, it actually worked out much better than I'd anticipated, Beck. Laura has no clue, and she seems to like you. No reason why she would think that we were lying to her. About anything."

Except, possibly, that the current topic was suddenly standing right there in the doorway, looking at them both with incomprehension in her almond eyes.

"Lying about *what*?"

"Oh crap." It wasn't exactly the most intelligent thing to say under the circumstances, so the fact that Big Sexy had said it made things so much worse. Hopping off the counter the tall woman approached her girlfriend tentatively with a weak little smile. "Aren't you supposed to be halfway to the studio by now?"

Laura lifted one hand, a flat little key dangling from her fingers. "Forgot the key." Her brown eyes took in Eileen, and then Beck. "Lying about *what*?"

Wincing at the toughness of the usually mellow tone Beck stepped forward, lifting placating hands. "Look, you just heard a small bit of the conversation; it would be easy to take it out of context and... "

Laura's voice was as cold as ice. "Sure, except that you're both obviously covering right now ... and you're both doing a horrible job of it. And that part's scaring the shit out of me. Eileen?" Lifting one eyebrow she fixed her gaze on her girlfriend.

"Um."

That was as far as Eileen was going to get. If Beck had been smarter she would have gotten out of the house right then, regardless, and never come back. But she didn't. She was strongly considering silence when Laura Miller's gaze fell on her, and she was still considering silence when her stupid traitorous mouth just gave up and rolled over.

"It was just the once, Laura, and it was a mistake. A massive mistake. I was drunk."

Comprehension visibly dawned in the blonde's eyes.

Eileen shot an incredulous look sideways. "Beck!"

"I told you, I can't keep doing this!" Beck lifted her shoulders helplessly. "I just said I was a college friend to help Big... to help Eileen out. It wasn't her fault."

The little key dropped onto the floor. Looking between the two of them, both shamefaced and guilty, Laura exhaled sharply. "What? You aren't ... " Brown eyes pinned Beck harshly. "Who exactly **are** you?"

"I'm just... I'm Beck. I'm who you think I am. Except I didn't... "

"She wasn't at college with me. I said that to... God, I'm sorry, Laura." Eileen moved forward and lifted her hands, but Laura stepped away from her embrace stiffly.

"No. Don't touch me."

Beck's mouth was trembling. "It was just sex, Laura, and that doesn't make it better, and I know that, but it wasn't like... It wasn't the same as when I kissed you... "

It took just a second to sink in for Eileen. "You **kissed her**?" Staring at Beck she pointed towards Laura. "You kissed **her**? What... " Her blue eyes fixed on Laura. "She kissed you? When was this? How could you... "

Laura's outburst was instant. "How can you ask me that after what you did? After you ... How dare you even ... Here I was, feeling so guilty, and all this time... "

"I think I need to go." Beck started towards the door, but was stopped in her tracks by two sets of angry eyes. "I think you guys have some things to sort out, okay?"

Raising her eyebrows Laura folded her arms. "So you start the trouble and then you run off when

things get ugly? How very noble of you."

"Hey. Unfair. I didn't mean to ... "

"You go when I'm ready for you to go, Beck. Were you *drunk* when you kissed Laura?" Eileen was stepping closer.

"It wasn't like that, okay."

"Were you trying to equalise the whole situation? What kind of crazy rationale were you using, huh?"

When Eileen took another step Laura intercepted her. "Eileen, you're so deep in the shit you should be trying to cover your own ass right now - do **not** try to shift the blame."

"I'm not!" Throwing Beck a sharp look over Laura's shoulder, Eileen motioned sharply. "At least I was a little drunk! At least I had an excuse! What's hers?!"

A hysterical laugh escaped from Beck's throat before she could control it. "My excuse? Nothing much - except that **I'm in fucking love with fucking Laura!**"

Some sentences have a way of stopping the noisiest moment in the blink of a surprised eye, or the flutter of a broken heart. This was the mother of them all. Laura's mouth opened without consulting its owner, and then closed again for lack of anything else to do. Eileen froze on the spot, her blue eyes fixing on Beck for the longest ten seconds in history before they moved to Laura. Standing before the two of them - one woman she genuinely liked and another she was completely in love with - Beck could feel her own eyes filling with tears, but there wasn't much she could do about it. She tried a small smile that came out gloomy and twisted.

"I don't even know who to apologise to."

Eileen cleared her throat too, and then turned her back on both of the women, resting her palms on the kitchen counter. "**Now** I'm ready for you to go."

Laura was crying. She caught Beck's gaze and held it for a moment, and the hurt in her brown eyes was so profound that Beck's heart just dropped to the floor. Nodding slowly the redhead walked past Eileen, past Laura, out through the front door and down the road. She didn't stop walking until her knees began to wobble, and then she collapsed ungracefully to the ground onto the nearest gutter. Dropping her head to her knees she wrapped her arms around it and gave in to the heaving sobs.

She must have cried for hours - or at least, that's what it felt like. When all the moisture in her body had finally left her and she was unable to muster up any more, she lifted her throbbing head and stared dismally at the pocked tar at her feet with swollen achy eyes. From somewhere in the back of Beck's traitorous skull, Celine Dion suddenly began to belt out "*All by myself*", and before she could stop herself the tears started again. Gritting her teeth in exhausted irritation she

hit herself in the head once, and then twice, ignoring the quick glance and hurried departure of a passer-by.

"Shut up, Celine! I don't need this, okay?"

But no, Ms-Dion-in-the-head smoothly segued into the chorus. It was just what Beck needed at this very moment: rebellious acts of terrorism from her own brain.

*"All by myself
Don't wanna be
All by myself
Anymore*

*Hard to be sure
Sometimes I feel so insecure
And loves so distant and obscure
Remains the cure"*

"Oh **shut UP!**"

With a frustrated sob Beck jumped up. It was as she spun on her heel desperately to find her way back home that she noticed the two teenage lovebirds cosily arranged on a blanket in the park behind her. The saucer-faced boy was staring at the sharp-chinned girl with doe eyes. At their feet stood a retro radio. Glowering at the scene, Beck stomped forward until she stood at the foot of the blanket. The two lovebirds looked up at her, the boy trying to look defiant and failing miserably, the girl not trying and succeeding magnificently.

"What you want, lady?" It came out breathless and quizzical, also probably not what the boy had intended.

Pointing at the radio with a stabbing motion Beck glared at him. "You listening to Celine?"

"Yeah." He shrugged a little self-consciously, then visibly puffed himself up again with a sidelong glance at his girl. "You got something to say 'bout it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do." Stuffing a hand down her front jeans pocket Beck pulled out a few notes. Giving the money a short and slightly demented glance she tossed it onto the blanket. "Here."

"Huh?" The girl was reaching for the notes, her eyes sharp. "What's this for?"

"Your new radio" Beck said just before she drew her foot back and kicked the existing model a distance that would have made any football player proud. Celine got as far as "*Those days are gone*" before she ended with a slight hiss and a dignified silence.

The two teenagers watched her warily, their mouths hanging slightly open. With a shrug and a snort Beck inclined her head in a nonchalant greeting, and then sniffed.

"Okay. See ya. Don't do drugs."

The sharp-faced girl smirked. "That's leading by example if I ever saw it."

There was no further sign of Celine when she began the long slow walk home, but she started to cry again anyway.

She deserved to, if she'd made Laura Miller cry.

Six months later

"You. Hey you! You disgusting ... cow!"

The voice was loud enough to carry over the general hubbub of people having fun. Immediately the bar became silent. Several sets of eyes swivelled to take in first the aggressor, her mouth set tightly, tension evident in every line of her body. Then, they swivelled to the right to take in the aggressed, who had slowly turned around and was laying her cue casually on the green baize of the pool table, her chin dropped dangerously. The two women stared at each other over a stretch of floor that had become miraculously deserted, their gazes locked, and then, finally, the woman at the pool table spoke.

"You disgusting cow? Come on, Eileen, can't you do better than that?"

Her tone was level. The same could not be said for the dark woman glaring at her.

"You little *asshole*."

One of those collective "oooooh"s went up from the people around them. The little asshole's mouth quirked on one side in an unamused arc. Raising one eyebrow she shook her head. "Oh, you do **not** want to go there, Lascaris."

"But I *do*." Eileen Lascaris took one step closer, her angular face stark. "I do so very much *want to go there*."

Rebecca Jarvis's smile was more a showing of teeth than anything. "I apologised, Eileen. And I meant it. I'm not going to do it again. Now just... piss off and leave me alone."

"Like you left Laura alone?" Eileen took another step. "Oh no, Jarvis. Not tonight. I demand retribution."

With a snort Beck shook her head. "Honestly, Big Sexy: *retribution*? You can even make a potential bar brawl sound downright boring. Seriously, *professor* - you don't want to do this. I could beat your ass in a New York minute."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when Big Sexy was on top of her. The taller woman's frame knocked her over and they scrabbled to the floor, both trying to apply secret fighting techniques and actually managing only to slap at each other's hands like schoolgirls. There was a smattered snicker in the audience. Big Sexy ended up on top, her long lean thighs wrapped around Beck's hips, and she was lifting her hand for a good sharp smack when a pair of hands wrapped around her torso and lifted her off quite unceremoniously. Furiously she spun around, ready to attack, but when she found herself facing a rather muscular and tattooed woman she sniffed indignantly and turned back to glare at the shorter woman who was currently being helped off the floor by a bystander.

Dusting off her clothes delicately, more for show than anything else, Beck nodded at the tattooed woman. "Thanks, Nat."

Big Sexy's glare shifted from Beck to Nat, and then, slowly, a frown crept over her forehead. "Isn't she the hairy troll woman who slept with your ex?"

"Now don't be rude." Beck blinked innocently. "Nat is a very nice person, when you get to know her. And besides, she didn't actually sleep with my ex. I told you that."

"Besides the point." Folding her arms Big Sexy cocked her head. "So you had to get your friends to bail you out, Beck?"

This time it was the bystander who had to grab Beck's upper arm as she launched herself forward. "I did not! I could have taken you! What would you have done - *counted* me to death?"

"Ha ha. Quaint. You tell your friends to lay off of me, and we can finish this right now."

Nat stepped between the two women, raising her hands and showing off impressively sinewy forearms. "Listen, ladies, I don't know what's up with you two, but I ain't gonna let you beat on each other. That's *so* uncivilized." Catching Big Sexy's look she shrugged. "So? I'm talking from experience. Best angle. If you two want to settle it some other way I'll ref."

Big Sexy opened her mouth and then closed it promptly, throwing an awe-inspiringly scathing narrow-eyed look at Beck, who gave as good as she got. Nat looked between them.

"So what you wanna do? You wanna arm-wrestle or something?"

Big Sexy's one eyebrow lifted. "Don't be ridiculous."

Beck sneered. "Yeah. Duh. You'd lose that one hands down. Heh."

"Is that right?" Big Sexy unfolded her arms very slowly. "Let's go, runt." It being Big Sexy, she probably *had* said runt.

"You want to do this? Fine!"

The two women squared off over a corner of the pool table, their gazes locked. Hands and wills met, and Nat checked their positioning before she counted them down. On "three" Big Sexy slammed Beck's hand into the baize without ceremony.

"Hey! Ow! You cheated!" Snapping back her hand Beck massaged her wrist irritably before she shuffled back into her wide stance. "Let's go. Let's goooooo!"

The second scenario was much a repeat of the first. If Beck had put up more of a fight it wasn't obvious. Yanking back her hand the smaller woman stomped in a circle, shaking it as she glared at Big Sexy.

The tall woman smirked. "Two out of three. You're done."

"Oh c'mon!" Stomping over to Nat, Beck appealed. "Her arms are longer than mine! Unfair!"

Nat shrugged. "Hey, you set the terms. I don't even know what you're playing for."

"Fine." Folding her arms, Beck pouted. "She can have it. Her stupid pride, or whatever. It wasn't fair anyway."

Big Sexy was glowering. "Right. Just like you to renege on a deal."

"Oh, and what does *that* mean?"

"Renege. Go back on your word. Sorry, I'll try to use shorter words."

"I know that! **Whatever!** It was stupid anyway."

"Nu-uh." Pursing her lips, Big Sexy shook her head. "You're asking for it. Want to go another round? I'm ready for you."

Leaning forward Beck reached for the pool cue. The audience exchanged nervous glances. Catching Big Sexy's quick look at her hands Beck snorted. "I'm not going to brain you with it. I'd need at least a brick for that skull." Picking up the little blue block, she chalked the cue's tip deliberately. "How about a game of pool, miss I-do-maths-for-fun?"

Big Sexy raised that eyebrow again. "Fine. Miss music-of-the-night. You're on."

Though Big Sexy had a surprisingly precise approach to the game, it soon became clear what Beck had done with most of her nights. The first game only lasted three minutes. In the second Big Sexy was a little more careful, but even that failed to check Beck's rapid smooth clearing of the table. When the black eight ball dropped into the corner pocket slowly, Beck slapped the cue onto the tabletop and folded her arms imperiously.

"**That's** how you do it. Two out of three. Consider your ass beaten."

Pressing her cue into a random woman's hand Big Sexy scoffed. "All it tells me is that I didn't have as much time to explore my degenerate nature as you have. It's a biased system."

"Seriously? Degenerate? Nice one. Come over here and say that again."

Nat audibly slapped her forehead into the palm of one hand, and for a moment the two women stopped their snippy repartee to peer at her. With a sigh the muscular woman shook her head. "I don't know what you two did to deserve each other, but karma's fucking hilarious."

Beck narrowed her eyes. "Thanks, Shirley MacLaine."

There was an audible snigger from Big Sexy before she managed to get herself under control. "Uh huh. What she said."

Nat exhaled in irritation. "What - now you're best buddies?"

The two women looked at each other for a moment, silence building, before Beck shook her head exaggeratedly. "Fuck off. If I hadn't had those two beers I could've had her with the arm-wrestling."

"Riiiiiiight." Elongating the word sarcastically, Big Sexy eye Beck innocently. "Well, if you can't handle your drink, you should probably find your chaperone for the evening and head home..."

"I beat your ass at pool, if I remember correctly..."

"... and that makes it one each, technically."

"So." Beck rolled her shoulders back challengingly. "What say we finish this with a drinking contest? I'll show you who needs a chaperone."

"A drinking contest?" Big Sexy gave a big fake yawn, exposing her perfect teeth. "How juvenile."

"And Big Sexy again with the 'I'll put it down if I can't do it' approach. Fine. If that's the way you want it."

"You know, it'll be worth the hangover times a million to see you falling on your face - again." Resolutely Big Sexy headed over to the bar. "Well? Come on, then."

With Beck and Big Sexy both perching on bar stools, the barman lined up the shots as Nat counted them loudly for the crowd of women who were gathered behind the two challengers.

"Right. Last woman standing wins. Go!"

The first shot of tequila went down smoothly. So did the second. The third was slower, and the

fourth was a test of will. On the fifth Big Sexy wavered for just a moment, but when she caught the undisguised smirk on Beck's face she moved right onto the sixth, slamming the tot glass down on the table so hard that the bottle of Cuervo bounced. Not to be outdone, Beck bit into her piece of lemon with a snarl and spat the rind into the audience, catching an unsuspecting woman solidly on the forehead. Big Sexy snorted a little raucously.

"Oh, it's like *that*, is it?"

"Yeah." Well, it was technically a yeah, though Beck's tongue changed direction halfway to try out a 'uh huh' and turned it into more of a 'yahhhuh'. "It's **exactly** like that."

On her first try Big Sexy's hand missed the seventh tot glass, but she managed to snatch it on the second. Most of the liquid even went into her mouth. Wiping her mouth on her sleeve she lifted the saltshaker to her mouth and shook it in the general direction of her lips. The sloshing liquid had made her hand slippery, however, and the saltshaker easily sailed from between her fingers to knock the same unsuspecting woman on the chest, adding white specks to the smattering of lemon rind on her shoulders.

Giggling a little, Beck raised both arms. "The German judge gives it a 10!"

With an angry brush at her shirt, the woman shook her head and leaned over to a friend. "What is this - the Idiot Olympics?"

If fate had been kind and things had happened the way they were intended to, Beck would have been off her barstool and teaching the woman something about Idiot Olympics that she'd never forget. Instead, fate took into account that Beck was drunk, clumsy and short. Her foot missed the bottom rung and, suddenly off-balance, she reached out and grabbed at the closest object - Big Sexy's sleeve. With an ominous tearing sound the material came off, and so did Big Sexy. There was a bit of a tussle as both women grappled, and then gravity gave up and they went crashing to the floor in a heap of tangled limbs. The bar stool considered its current precarious position, balancing on one leg, and then went into an entirely different direction in sympathy.

With a worried glance to the women tittering behind her Nat stepped closer. There was no movement, and then, suddenly, a chuckle rose from somewhere in the tangle. Who it was didn't matter, as it was soon joined by a chortle that escalated into a full fit of giggling. The people clustered around them burst into laughter and for a while they enjoyed the kind of mirth that only exists where alcohol has been consumed. Finally, extracting herself with a last snigger and a wipe to her eyes, Big Sexy unfolded her long limbs and stood up, dragging Beck with her.

"I'm still angry at you, Jarvis."

"So you said, Lascaris." Delicately Beck removed half a beer label from her hair. It wasn't even the brand she liked. "You want to luge me for victory?"

"I'm not wearing the right shoes." They looked at each other for a moment, and somehow the intro to Seal's "Love's Divine" began to pipe into the background. Two foreheads crinkled in

confusion, until a somehow-all-wrong-and-only-vaguely-guessing-the-octave vocal began and Big Sexy spotted the karaoke stage off to the side. Inclining her head in that direction she raised an eyebrow.

"I'll sing you for it."

Peering over her shoulder, Beck watched the big man currently singing his heart out to two drunken couples and a heckling man. With a harrumph she turned back. "Yawhatnow?"

"Sing you for it." Catching the uncertain look crossing the smaller woman's face, Big Sexy grinned. "You're a music teacher, Jarvis. You should have at least an *idea* of what's what. Or you can capitulate right now."

"Riiiiight. Caputi... Catippu... No. I don't believe I will. Lead on." It seemed to be a figure of speech, as Beck proceeded to lead on imperiously, showing off the other half of the beer label stuck to her butt.

However soulful his interpretation of a song, no man can ignore the approach of one smallish red-haired woman, followed by a tall statuesque black-haired woman - stumbling a little surreptitiously - followed by about thirty more chortling people. He got as far as a tremulous "*Please forgive me now I know that I've been blaaaaaaah....*" before retreating in bewilderment. When Big Sexy cocked her head at Beck, the smaller woman swept her hand towards the stage theatrically.

"Oh please. Be my *guest*."

"With *pleasure*." Climbing the steps - or most of them - to the small stage, Big Sexy leaned over to confer with the technician briefly before she grasped the microphone and licked her lips. One of the women in the audience dared to let fly with a wolf-whistle, which promptly stuck its tail between its legs and slunk off faced by the professor's steely-eyed glare.

When the simple piano intro began, several of the women started to clap and nod appreciatively. Taking a deep breath, Big Sexy began.

*"The summer days are gone too soon
You shoot the moon
And miss completely
And now you're left to face the gloom
The empty room that once smelled sweetly
Of all the flowers you plucked, if only
You knew the reason
Why you had to each be lonely
Was it just the season?"*

It took only the first line for Beck to know that she had lost completely, irrevocably, and inarguably. Eileen Lascaris had the kind of voice that belonged in a smoky club, all warmth and huskiness, promising good things and better days. It prompted the entire bar into silence, and

several of the people who had been clustered around the pool table wandered over quietly and leaned against the walls, completely taken in by the woman on the stage.

*"Now the fall is here again
You can't begin to give in
It's all over."*

Though Beck had wanted to be churlish, she simply couldn't. Closing her eyes against the haunting melody, she fought a lingering mental image of Laura, and when she opened them again they were filled with tears. Wiping her forearm over her face nonchalantly she sighed and sat back, listening to the last few exquisite bars.

*"When the snows come rolling through
You're rolling too with some new lover
Will you think of times you've told me
That you knew the reason
Why we had to each be lonely
It was just the season."*

To thunderous applause Eileen handed back the microphone and left the stage, blushing slightly as several people patted her back and leaned in to compliment her. When she'd managed to move through the gauntlet, she came to a halt in front of Beck's chair and looked down at her, taking in the tear-stained cheeks silently. Eileen's words were flippant but her voice was gentle.

"Your turn. Runt."

Smiling a little, Beck rose and climbed the stairs, taking the microphone from the stand. Looking into the expectant audience, she found her opponent waiting patiently.

"Eileen?" Surprise registered on the tall woman's face at the use of her actual name. "You win. I'm sorry. Really. I'm *so* sorry."

Eileen nodded at her once, her eyes unnaturally bright, and then wiped off the chair delicately before she sat down. Beck couldn't be sure, with the lights in her eyes, but she could have sworn the other woman had mouthed the words "me too."

Leaning over, Beck whispered in the technician's ear, almost giggling at his googly-eyed look of surprise before she cleared her throat and gave her very mediocre best.

*"I could never say where it came from
Taste don't matter if it's gone
When the client ain't bright
Or particularly tight
... one of those ...
Taste comes and goes."*

Random members of the audience began to cackle and hum along.

*"Heeeeeel-lo, Ruby Toothpaste
Tastes as crap as tennis shoes
bites my ass with every new day
I've still gotta floss toooooo..."*

It was as she leaned over, arm propped on the microphone stand, howling out the last note like a banshee on acid, that Beck caught sight of blonde hair that may have been a little clichéd for some, but that would definitely shimmer in the sun; almond eyes that may perhaps have been slightly too exotic for ordinary tastes, but that looked beautiful when crinkled at the corners in absolute amusement. It was when Laura Miller smiled that sweet little curling smile that Beck suddenly trembled, the microphone stand gave in under her weight, and she went sprawling forward, head first into the sound box and the unprepared technician.

She could have sworn that the last words she heard were "Idiot Olympics Gold Medallist."

Oh crap. Oh lord oh lord oh lord. Oh *truckloads*.

There was something in her head. It was a mean small man with a sledgehammer, keeping rhythm with the apocalypse going on outside. But just as she was about to beg him to stop, or at least to die trying, she became aware of an entirely different sensation. A hand was stroking gently through her hair, lingering over her forehead, and tracing over her temple (oh, the pain! Oh, the wonderfulness!) before resuming its gentle combing.

From the sensation under her butt she had probably been laid out on one of the uncomfortable couches, but her head was cradled in something infinitely softer and more comforting. And it smelled like home.

It took Beck three tries to crack open one eyelid, and when she managed to get it right she had to snap that eye shut against the light, to her chagrin. At the periphery of her almost-vision something moved, and when she attempted her dangerous manoeuvre again, it was to find Nat crouched in front of her, effectively blocking out the treacherous glow.

"Beck? Can you hear me?"

"Uh. Huh." Her throat was dry. She tried to turn her head, but the hand in her hair shifted momentarily to hold her still.

Nat was peering into her eyes critically with an expression that she must have seen on ER. "Don't move, okay. Can you tell me what day it is?"

Forcing open her other eye Beck blinked it sluggishly (the two weren't quite in sync, but beggars couldn't be choosers) and peered upwards at the heart-shaped face hovering concernedly near

hers before she looked back at Nat, her forehead wrinkling in confusion. "I died, didn't I? Died during karaoke. That's sad. Hit my head and became dearly departed. Don't put the details on my gravestone, please. Am I rambling? Hello, Laura Miller."

The face above her head gave a small inverted smile. "Hello, Beck."

"But really, Nat. Did I die? Not that I mind, because as visitations go, this one is magnificent..."

A very real hand moved from her hair to lay itself gently across her mouth, silencing her. Leaning down, Laura spoke softly into her ear. "What day is it, Beck?"

Beck could have sworn that the whole world could hear her swallowing. "Um. Saturday. If I'm not dead then I think I'm fine. Okay."

"Okay."

"I'll just..." but as she sat up the world told her in no uncertain terms what it thought of her recent shenanigans, "ge... ah... whoo.... errrr... urrrrrrhhh..."

Gentle hands pulled her back down into Laura's warm lap. "Why don't you just take a moment?"

"Muh. Uh huh. I can do that." Closing her eyes for a moment against the hand that seemed to gravitate unconsciously to her head, Beck sighed. "Although I love it, you might not want to do that. You don't know where it's been. Um."

A warm laugh tickled over her face. Laura Miller's breath smelled like cinnamon, for no reason whatsoever. "I'll take my chances."

Her gaze hopping between the two of them, Nat nodded slowly. "Ooooo-kay. Look, I'll be back soon, Beck. Are you sure you I don't need to take you to the hospital?"

"No. I mean yes. Nat. I'm fine. Can't you tell?"

"Rarely." Nat winked at her. "Let me know if you need me to drive you home." And then she was gone.

That's how it seemed to Beck, anyway. When Laura Miller was near her, it was as if the woman sucked in her attention without doing a thing. As if everything else was happening on the periphery.

A niggling little thought inserted itself into her daze with a crowbar. "Where's Eileen?"

"She went home." Laura's eyes crinkled at the corners. "She said she was absolutely sure that nothing could put a dent in your head."

"She's right." Beck tried for nonchalance. "Home?" Her voice betrayed her with a little squeak,

and nonchalance fell flat on its ass.

"Her home." Cupping Beck's face briefly with a hand, Laura smiled gently. "Eileen's *okay*, Beck. You don't have to worry about her. She just got a little maudlin tonight because it would have been our third anniversary."

A little frown crept onto Beck's face. "How'd you find me? Us?"

"She phoned me some time earlier tonight."

"Why?"

"I think she was just missing me. Hey. Don't. I can see you beating yourself up."

Beck's bottom lip jutted into an unconscious pout. "How can't I, Laura? I ruined your relationship." Struggling to get into a sitting position, she tried to ignore the spinning of her head and the warm soft hands at her back, helping her up. "And you can't say I didn't."

"Well, I can, but that would be silly." Laura rubbed a gentle hand over Beck's bowed back. "Beck. There were things that weren't working long before you. I can't say that the episode with Eileen wasn't the last... um... getting nailed in the coffin... but if it hadn't been you, it would have been someone else. Eileen wouldn't have been tempted if she hadn't been dissatisfied, and I wouldn't have kissed you that day if I hadn't felt the same."

"Oh." Chewing on the inside of her lip Beck sighed. "So I was just a means to an end, then."

Laura leaned forward and tried to catch the other woman's eye. "You were a catalyst, Beck, but in the best possible way."

Peering off into the distance, Beck sniffed. "She won, you know."

"What? Who won?"

"Eileen. She won the gold medal in the Idiot Olympics."

A small, confused frown crept onto Laura's face. "I think you should lie down, Beck..."

"No, I'm fine, really. It's..." Beck searched for the right words. "She challenged me to a competition - that's why I was on stage. But she blew me out of the water. Have you ever *heard* Big Sexy sing?"

"Yeah. She's unbelievable. She often helped me out when I worked on the jingles. I tried to convince her for the longest time to record a CD, but she'll only sing in front of other people when she's drunk."

"That's just sad."

"Music is an incidental for Eileen." Laura stopped, and when Beck glanced back at her quizzically she found the warm almond eyes fixed on her quietly.

"What?"

"Eileen challenged you to a singing competition - and you chose to sing my jingle? Or at least, your perverted version of it?"

A blush rose to the very top of Beck's ears. Bashfully she stared down at her fingers intertwined on her lap. "Well. I ... Um. The thing is. The second time we met, at the supermarket, I told you that I'd made up my own words, and I wouldn't tell you. It's... sorry, it's kind of cheesy..."

A hand laid itself over her clasped hands lightly. "No, Beck, it's not."

"Yeah it is." Glancing at Laura, Beck offered her a self-deprecating grin. "The thing is, I know there are so many things I'll never get to say to you that I just wanted that one little thing off my chest and out of my head. It's not much, but for me it's a start."

"I liked it."

"But Eileen's was better. So much better. That woman should come with a warning."

Laura smiled. "So you didn't tell me. What did Eileen actually win?"

"It's hard to say." Beck shrugged a little guiltily. "We've had a LOT of tequila. Things that make sense after half a bottle of Cuervo don't necessarily translate well to after you've hit your head on a sound technician. But as far as I can tell it was for pride."

"That's nice for her."

"Yeah. She really demolished me."

Laura's fingers combed through the hair at the nape of Beck's neck for the briefest moment. "No harm in losing. I think what you have isn't that bad either."

"What? A lump on my head? A bruised ego?"

"Really?" There was a note of teasing in Laura's voice. "A bruised ego? Poor baby."

Beck snorted. "Fat lot of good you are at sympathy. But don't try to distract me. What is it that I have that apparently isn't so bad?"

Laura's fingers dragged gently down Beck's neck.

"God, but you're slow sometimes. *Me*, Beck."

When Laura Miller's lips met Rebecca Jarvis's mouth halfway and the fireworks and the whooshing and the spinning began, Beck had no idea whether it was the touch of the woman she loved, or whether she really had a concussion, but she didn't care.

She may not have won the Idiot Olympics, but she'd certainly gotten to carry the torch.

Lyrics (and no, they obviously don't belong to me, otherwise I wouldn't still have a day job):

"Shoot the moon" - Norah Jones

"Ruby Tuesday" - Rolling Stones (correct lyrics section below)

*She would never say where she came from
Yesterday don't matter if it's gone
While the sun is bright
Or in the darkest night
No one knows
She comes and goes*

*Goodbye, Ruby Tuesday
Who could hang a name on you?
When you change with every new day
Still I'm gonna miss you...*
