

punk and zen

PaRt 1: the ReMiX
(Extended DJ Cut)

JD GLASS



LOVE BITES
MY FACE IS GREEN NOW IT'S TURNING BLUE
I THINK I GOT IT FROM FUCKING YOU
MAKE IT GO AWAY

“Make It Go Away”—Adam’s Rib

I KNOW WHAT YOU’RE THINKING.

You think you’ve seen this before, heard it before, felt it before.

But it’s not true—not for any of us.

Especially when it comes to that crazy, crazy, little four letter word.

Yeah.

Love.

As in L.O.V.E.

That thing everyone wants, and searches and reaches for, and a few, a very rare and lucky few, even get to experience: could be from a friend, could be from a parent, could be from a partner.

Maybe.

The lucky ones.

Because honestly, otherwise?

It *sucks*.

See now, here’s the deal about love, such as it is.

First, there they are, the boy/girl/alien of your dreams, and they are bee-yoo-tee-fool, with an emphasis on *fool*, and of course, they have a tragic story—what else could make them so alluring, if they weren’t just so strong and vulnerable, so needing to be rescued and loved, and of course, you and me, the idiots with the good hearts, do just that—rescue and love—hoping, because we’re so darn noble, and worthy, and deserving, and darn it, just

so *nice*, that when the pain is over, the boy/girl/alien will see that love was here with them all along, inhabiting our bodies.

Second, of course, there are challenges, obstacles along the way: you have to prove your love, prove that the object of your affections is worthy of love, because of course, being so damaged, they're not very trusting, and we'll just have to understand that, be patient. It's not us, it's them, and after all, they knew they were never very lovable to begin with—they just somehow seem to push everyone who loves them away.

We, of course, swallow this hook, line and sinker, and vow to ourselves that WE, YOU, I, will be the one, *the very one*, because of our goodness and purity of love, to prove to the damaged basket case of a boy/girl/alien once and for all that yes, love is real, life is good, and sex, well, okay, it would be nice (oh so very, very nice) but not necessary, because, after all, this is true love—and there are no conditions on true love, especially for those (read: *us*, the suckers) who are noble of heart. Besides, that's not what we're all about, since we're so noble and good and all, and we don't want the poor wounded boy/girl/alien to think we're just in this to get laid.

Really.

Third, and it never fails, comes the come-here-no-go-away sequence. Conversations tend to run along these lines: "This is never going to work, it's not you, it's me—get out!"

This is generally always followed by tears and groveling, vehement statements as to why we, the hero of this epic aren't really good enough, the tragic departure scene and then, a call on the cell phone when halfway home on a five hour or more drive: "Baby, I'm sorry, I miss you, I need you, come back."

Whereupon, the knight turns the steel horse around (or gets on the bus, the plane, pulls out a bicycle or walks) back to the scene of the original bloodletting, all forgiveness and understanding, because after all, they're hurting, they've had a damaging past, and we're here to heal that—*all* of that.

At about this point, casual friends and distant cousins have started to make comments, like, "Hmmm, why don't you hang out with *us* tonight? We have a few friends coming over, remember [insert name of puppy love crush]? Yeah, we just ran into each other, and wouldn't it be great? If we all

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hung out like?” or other such things like, “Geez, are you okay? Wanna talk about it?”

Our most intimate of friends and family are just telling us directly, “Lose the crazy boy/girl/alien, because seriously, you’re getting, no wait—you *are* brain damaged. C’mon, we’ll get you drunk, we’ll get you laid, and you’ll feel much better.”

And the really sad thing is, how did they know we weren’t getting laid? Seriously.

All this suffering, and no loving to make up for it. Oh yeah, maybe, a couple of times, maybe even a lot—the first few weeks—but then, all that *baggage* shows up (damage, remember?) and, well...it just ain’t happening anymore.

After a long time of this (and we, the noble rescuers, put up with this for a while, sometimes years, because the boy/girl/alien never really breaks it clean, so we have hope) we finally realize that we’ve been had, taken for a ride, to the cleaners and back, tire tracks on our backs, nobility wasted, heart sore and certainly not nearly as trusting or as nice as before. Sometimes the rescuer becomes the boy/girl/alien to some other undeserving good sort, and the cycle continues: hallelujah and pass the ammunition.

It’s true: how someone hurt you, you’ll hurt someone else and on and on it goes. Because Love leaves no innocents behind and everyone’s got blood on their hands.

Everyone.

Even you and me, the “good guys.” There aren’t any innocents, not in the end—not with this.

This is one type of love, and I’m sad to say, I’ve not only witnessed this happen to beloved family members and friends, but I myself have followed this sad, sad pattern.

There’s another reason why love *sucks* like the center of the black hole our Universe revolves around, though, and I’m not talking about the reasons already listed above. I’m talking about real love, true love, where you love and you fight, and you laugh and you cry, you never ever get to make love as much as you’d like too, and when you do, it’s like Chinese food because you come and you want more, even if you’re too tired to do it again, and all the time you spend together isn’t enough—you may have friends and family and share each other’s, spend time in and out together, but time together

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and alone is precious, and almost jealously hoarded, and the absolute *best* part of your day is when you finally get to hold each other and fall asleep together, the *most* beautiful thing is waking up and they're right there, right next to you, and the absolute worst—just simply the *worst*—part is saying goodbye for the work day.

So, now what happens? No one really ever wants to do the dishes and occasionally you flip a coin to see who gets to walk the dog or clean the cat litter, and when is money never an issue, but the truth, the absolute truth is, you deal with separation anxiety every single moment you aren't together, and while you enjoy doing things and have healthy relationships outside your duo-ism, your couple-hood, your togetherness, the simple fact remains that nothing ain't nearly as much fun as when your love is there.

This...does not go away. *Ever.*

You deal with the day-to-day crap of living, you deal with the missing of one another, and you ache, your heart sore and sick, arms and skin empty, until you're together again—even if you do end up rolling your eyes at the damn spoon in the sink and laughing about who forgot to pick up toilet paper.

Oh, sure, time passes, two, five, maybe even almost a dozen years go by, and you learn, because you have to, because the damned world is way too busy to let lovers be, to shove the emptiness down, and maybe, sometimes...

You even let it go for a moment or two.

But still, like a shovel to the back of the head, it slams you then buries you in burning coal, because you miss, you really and truly miss your boy/girl/alien, your *soulmate*, for cryin' out loud!

So you get in touch, just to connect for a moment, even if it's just to talk about that damned spoon again, because it doesn't matter to either one of you whether you're fucking or fighting, as long as you're doing it together.

STUDIO B

**I'VE BEEN DREAMING AGAIN AND SOMETHING TELLS ME
I'M STANDING ON THE WALL—IF I DON'T JUMP, I'LL FALL
I'VE BEEN FEELING AGAIN AND I REMEMBER
THERE'S NOTHING LEFT TO GAIN DRINKING FROM THE PAIN
I SAY GOODBYE FOR THE MOMENT—I SAY GOODBYE AND I'M FROZEN
I SAY GOODBYE FOR THE MOMENT—I SAY GOODBYE AND I'M GOLDEN**

...

DON'T CRY FOR ME

“I Say Goodbye”—JD Glass

I SAT ALONE OUTSIDE THE control room, because with the exception of the bassist who was doing some back-up vocal takes, everyone else had found somewhere else in the building to be for the moment; grabbing food or cigarettes or some other stuff. No such luck for me, though. I was sucking down a cup of tea that was probably too cold to do any good, as well as missing milk and sugar to boot—which is the way I like it, but unfortunately, milk was out if I wanted to sing—and trying to collect myself.

Through the soundproof glass doors, I could see the hands of Mr. JJ “Bear” Jenns, the engineer, flying over the hundred thousand points of light, buttons, sliders, and whatchamacallits, eyes closed and grooving along to the sound that wasn’t merely enough for him to have flowing through his head set, but also had to be pumped through the studio monitors.

As for myself, I couldn’t tell if my teeth were rattling and my hands bouncing because I was nervous or because I could hear the tracks for myself, and they were making circular waves in my cup.

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So much for soundproof, I thought wryly and grimaced. I sighed with acceptance of this moment, then quickly downed the rest of the tepid, brown, sweet water.

The cup crunched loudly to my ears as I crumpled it in my hands out of sheer nerves, then tossed it in the can. I knew it was time I got my ass up and off the sofa I'd parked myself on to walk back into the studio, because it sounded like the backup vocal had been nailed to me. This meant it would any-second-now be my turn to do a final lead vocal take.

"All right then baby, let's give it a listen." Bear spoke into the microphone hooked through the soundboard.

"I think I'd like to try that again." An alto female voice floated back into the room through the monitors.

"Well, I think it sounded pretty damn good," Bear commented mildly. "Wasn't pitchy or anything. Come on, take a break, hear it for yourself, and then see what you think." He waved "come here" through the window into the studio. "We'll roll it under Nina's take."

Now, a word about Bear: Bear was, well, big. His chair was custom made, large enough to hold three people comfortably and still it bent under him, and though his military style beard was neatly trimmed, his hair was wild, totally curly and long, sticking out at crazy angles. He used that mane as a holder for this foot-long, inch-wide pencil he manipulated the knobs and faders he couldn't reach by himself across that tremendous soundboard/mixing console/mother ship/communication center.

In a word, he was huge: larger than life itself, and more real than stereo color. Of course, my mind may have over reacted to the situation by painting things in hyper-realism, but then again, I'd never been in my own recording studio before, or worked with my own hand-picked engineer.

I heard the pop of electric disconnect, the head set was put down, and Bear slid his chair along the huge board to open the door to the right of it.

The foam-padded door opened, revealing dark long hair pulled back into a ponytail parked over a pair of usually clear but now stony blue eyes and lips that weren't smiling. A shirt that had been pulled off due to the threat of heat exhaustion hung from the waist band, leaving only a black tank top over black jeans, and a bass guitar slung over a strong bare shoulder to complete the picture.

Words floated in with the body.

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“Dude, I think there’s one section—a measure towards the end of the break—that I’m going to need to redo,” she said, voice slightly hoarse from effort. “Ya know baby, you’re just a perfectionist,” I said and smiled, walking towards her. “Because from what I heard? I think you nailed it.”

Samantha’s eyes lit up when she heard my voice, realizing I was there.

“Hey, you’re back!” Samantha answered with obvious delighted surprise.

A smile that’s just for me graced her lips, and her arms reached out as I neared. I was completely caught up in the pull I always feel between us and it was less than a heartbeat before I was where I wanted to be and her lips were where I really needed them: on mine.

No kidding, no shit and I’m sure to some, no surprise, either, I live, and I mean *live*, for those kisses: soft and sensual, filled with tenderness and love, or hard, demanding, and speaking in the most direct way of good ole’ fashioned primal lust.

All of them inflamed desire, but this wasn’t the time or place—there was a job to do, and we were paying by the hour, here. A greedy moment or two, okay, well maybe it was more, of that sweet fullness, a line of fire running from the tip of her tongue through me, and we broke off, both of us breathless and my face flush and warm, just in time to hear Bear speak under his breath.

“Okay, if I balance the highs here and pan through the mids—”

“I’m ready to give it a shot, Bear,” I interrupted, and he whirled in his chair to face us, pushing that mutant pencil back into his tangled curls. “This is one hell of a hot track.” He grinned. “You sure you inspired her enough there?” He nodded his chin at Samantha. “I mean, don’t let me interrupt, do what you need to do to get her, uh—” he flushed into his beard “—get it, down, er, done.”

I glanced back over towards her.

Either Samantha was blushing or she was feeling the after effects of our friendly little greeting, because her face was as red as mine felt. I squeezed her hip gently and let go.

“Time to get this show on the road,” I murmured in apology and moved towards the sound room door, but Samantha tightened her grip a moment and pulled me gently back to her.

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Her lips brushed against my ear. “We’ll finish this later,” she softly growled, sending warm chills along my neck. “And Frankie should be home.”

“Definitely—and awesome!” I enthused in just as heated a tone, and I turned my head for a quick kiss, which was exactly when a flash went off in my face, blinding me momentarily.

I heard a laugh I recognized.

“Oh, that was perfect love, just keep going,” the laughing voice said. “Don’t let me stop you.”

I blinked away the white and green clouds in my eyes. “I’m blind. Candace must be here,” I stated loudly.

The light clouds faded and shifted from green to purple, and a slight figure approached and resolved itself in my view.

“Hey, you know I couldn’t miss this,” the animated young woman said in the slight Brit accent that was distinctly hers, while she gave us each a hug. “You didn’t do your takes yet, did you?”

Ah...Candace.

How to describe her?

She was perhaps a few inches taller than me and currently, she’d been coloring her wavy hair black and keeping it short so that it never came past her chin. She had incredibly beautiful green eyes, deep and dark forest green, and Candace made up in sheer energy for at least two people. Her presence was so vibrant, you actually had to stop to count how many people in the room. Truth be told, most of them were usually her—her and her whatchamacallit, her aura.

Well, that and her camera, too.

Outside of being one of the most dynamic people I’d ever met, Candace was a class-A, number one photographer, who just happened to specialize in rock ‘n’ roll. I, for one, was glad she’d gotten sick of doing A&R—Artists and Repertoire—assignments for the label we’d all worked for and took up the flash.

Her photography was so fantastic; I actually liked the way she made me look in photos, and that’s saying something because I generally *hate* my pictures. Besides, in addition to the wonderful eye she had for composition, Candace was actually a friend, and when it came to the band’s link to the public, I trusted her either to take our pictures or guide us in the right

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direction professionally; she knew her shit, she knew it cold, and she knew she knew it, too.

The light flare finally faded from my eyes and I could see clearly again. “I’m just about to go in, actually.”

“Glad you could make it.”

“Hey, just wanted you to have that ‘live’ feel.” Candace smiled and flashed her camera at me again. “And I wouldn’t miss this, anyway.”

I kissed Samantha’s cheek, my eyes still light-blind from the second flare. “Let’s do this thing,” I told her, my nerves shaky in my throat.

I turned again for the door.

“Sit and listen with me,” Samantha said to Candace as I pushed through the foam baffling to the doorknob, twisting it firmly. I could see the bounce of the camera flash through the room as Candace took some shots of Bear and the soundboard.

“You know, love, when these girls get down, they rock it all night,” I heard her tell Bear, and I couldn’t help but smile.

I closed the door behind me, and made my way to the microphone that had been suspended from the ceiling for me. That was done because a mounted one would have picked up sound from my feet as I danced and grooved. A set of headphones hung from an otherwise empty mic stand, just waiting for me.

I slipped them on.

I glanced around at the drum set behind me. It sat on a riser that was filled with sand to dampen vibration, and my gaze quickly swept across the various amps and guitars next to them in stands. I’d been in a vocal booth in the corner of this room before doing “scratch” vocals—a guide track for the band so that the recording would feel “live”—but that had been with the whole band, together.

Now, though, I was standing in the center of the studio.

Alone.

I reached up to the microphone and made a few minute adjustments for my height and comfort.

“Okay, Nina baby, you hear me?” Bear asked in my ears, his voice loud and clear.

“Yeah, you’re fine,” I answered back into my own microphone.

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Through the glass I could see what might have been one or two people coming into the sound booth to sit behind Bear. *Probably the rest of the band*, I figured.

Samantha's voice cut into the silence of my headphones. "Kitt's here, love."

"Hey Kitt," I greeted enthusiastically through the mic, because it was Kitt when we were in public, and "Frankie" when it was just us.

Oh, but I was happy and seriously relieved she was there as I waved "hello" to the glass. One of those shadows might have waved back.

Suddenly, I felt strange, and a huge lump formed itself in my throat. This was completely different from either the rehearsal studio or a stage performance, and it was so very weird, singing in front of the band, having them watch instead of actually playing with me.

An idea struck me.

"Do me a favor, Bear?" I asked. "Lower the lights out there, and give me a dim spot, okay?"

"You want the smoky nightclub effect?" he asked, his voice perfectly stereo-balanced in the center of my head.

"No, I want the 'it's so dark in here we can barely see our instruments, never mind the audience' effect," I explained. "Where the light is so weird it makes the space very intimate and everyone's hanging on to the sound and just feeling everything going on—like a low-burning fire."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh." Bear nodded, and the lights dimmed.

I could barely make out Bear's figure behind the board and Samantha, Candace, and whoever else was there dissolved into vaguely humanoid shadows. The sound stage blackened around me for a moment, then a small, warm, light resolved above my head, directly in front and over the microphone. The overall effect was similar to candlelight, but without the fitfulness that wax and air display.

"That good?" Bear's voice asked, almost hushed in the environment we'd created.

I forced the air in and out of my lungs slowly. *Focus, determination*, I thought to myself, and drew up in my mind the song and its structure.

"That's perfect," I answered in a steady voice, letting my breath out gradually.

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I breathed again, still slow, still focused on muscle and air. I tried to ignore the sounds through my headphones of Bear readying the console and chairs scraping behind him.

Chairs? I asked myself. Now *who's watching this?* But I shoved both the question and the curiosity away. It had no place here, in this now.

“In a moment, Nina,” Bear’s voice came again, strong, sure, and confident in the semi-darkness.

This was what he did, and did best: capture musicians, music and emotion blended and expressed, phrase followed by phrase, note replaced by note, building and shaping the ephemeral—for all time.

No pressure, no, none at all, I told myself, *this is just going down on permanent record.*

I swallowed as I nodded, reaching deep within to draw into my gut all the emotions that I needed to do the music justice, and the events that had created them into my mind, because before this studio, before the music for this recording ever existed, this was my life—before all of it, even Frankie and Samantha, though I suppose you could say that in some way, they’d always been there, all along.

Suddenly, it all clicked.

I was there, I was in the moment.

I was ready.

My headphones came to life again when drumsticks clicked the opening time into my ears, cuing my entrance.

“One, two, three, four...”

GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN/DOMINION

I REMEMBER INNOCENCE AROUND ME

I REMEMBER LOOKING AT THE SKY

I REMEMBER HEAVEN USED TO GROUND ME

I REMEMBER KNOWING HOW TO CRY

“I Fall”—JD Glass

I WAS AT THE IN place, the hot spot, the place to see, be seen, and be cool. Welcome to the Redspot, located on ever-so-friendly Bay Street on Staten Island, New York, home of antiques and “junque” by day, and the, I mean *the*, coolest place in the counterculture by night.

My second year of college was over for the summer, my apartment was only a few blocks away, and I didn't have to be anywhere but school in September and work on Friday. But since it was only July, and this Thursday, there were no obligations for at least another day yet, and that wasn't until ten at night, baby.

“*Mas tequila!*” Van roared, slamming his shot glass down on the bar in front of him, hair falling over his chin. He stared through the strands at his glass, as if fluid would magically appear in it.

“What are you talking about, ‘more tequila?’” Trace teased from behind him and shoving his shot glass to the side, she slid into his lap, beer in hand. She held her green bottle to his lips, and he gulped at it desperately.

“That's your fourth Flaming Sambuca, and the third time you've almost set yourself on fire,” she reminded him in her honeyed whiskey voice and withdrawing the bottle from him, she replaced it with her lips.

Her wavy, long black hair fell down in a curtain over them both.

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Well, that was more than enough of a show for me, I thought, and turning my eyes from what had evolved from a make out into a mauling, I decided to check out the scene.

The bar was built on top of a long-ass, old, bright red, Cadillac convertible with the chrome sticking out just far enough to make a comfortable foot rest. In the long narrow corridor the front bar created (because there was a back room, too), a couple of TVs hung from the walls, showing cartoons and underground videos. Sound bins hung alternately from the ceiling throughout the room, pumping up the music from the juke box and the light was just enough to make out faces, sit in a corner and write pretentious poetry, or read your beer label, but not enough to show the tiredness, sorrow, or just the effects of too much partying—which was probably a good thing, if you really think about it.

I put my own drink down on the bar, just an orange juice mixed with cranberry. I'd already done a pitcher (or was it two?) of Red Death shots with Trace, so I was slowing down a bit. Oh, and by the way, Red Death is an Alabama Slammer mixed with Kamikazes—that's the best I can explain them. You'll just have to go ask your bartender for a few of 'em, okay?

I had all night to play, I didn't want to get too messed up, you know, so I made my decision. I was going to the back room to dance. The scene up here in the front was lame, and no way was I going to play appreciative audience for Trace, who loved to perform for whoever was available, or just watch the damn TV. I could do that back at my apartment if I really wanted to, and I didn't want to.

As I wove through the press of bodies to the back corridor, then took the sharp right to the couple of steps into the dance room, I nodded "hellos" to people who greeted me as I passed. I loved those steps: they were painted to look like a giant, triple-level piano keyboard.

The guitar riff from the Cult's "She Sells Sanctuary" gave way to the opening harmonics of the New York Choral Society and the start of "This Corrosion," by the Sisters of Mercy. At ten minutes long, this is an incredible song lyrically as well as awesome to dance to, and my feet were already moving towards the center of the dance floor.

I waved up to Darrel up in the DJ booth, his blue Mohawk proud and high on his head and bobbing in time to the rhythm. He waved in return and continued his mixing. I lost myself in the throb of the music.

Spinning and twisting to the beat, dancers mixed and mingled as people admired each other's style, of dancing, clothes or body, and I ended up dancing with a girl I didn't really know but had seen there before. Darrel and I referred to her between ourselves as "Blue," because that's the color she always wore.

Tonight was no exception. Her latest variation was a body hugging electric blue mini dress with a skirt that ended a scant two, maybe three inches below her definition, leaving several inches of bare leg above her spider web patterned thigh-high stockings and dark hair teased up into a tousled bunch. It was too dark to tell what color it really was, but I'd seen her in that dress before. We didn't say a word, but just smiled and played moves off of each other.

For the record, she danced very well.

"Thanks for the dance," I smiled to her as the song changed into the next.

"No, thank you," she responded with a smile of her own and we said nothing for a moment or two. Awkwardness crept into the silence.

"Well, I'll see you around the dance floor." I grinned to end the silent discomfort, neatly ending this interchange. My line was polite and just a touch charming, and that was always my preferred ticket out of an awkward situation. Remember this for future situations (and there's always one).

"Hey yeah, see you 'round," she returned.

Grin still in place, I waved and turned to make my way to the bathroom—might as well check on my hair, I figured.

I nudged my way back through the body press, up three little stairs that took me out of the backroom, and turned through a narrow corridor towards the female-designated plumbing facilities.

Odd, I observed. When that place was empty, it was literally as cold as a meat locker, but add people, then turn up the music, and you could barely tell the place was air conditioned it was so steamy, unless you were in the small corridor, or in the bathroom, like me.

I waited patiently for a spot to open in front of the mirror-wall opposite the toilet stalls and once there, I gave myself the once-over, starting with my hair—the most important part. Amazingly, it still looked good.

Shaved to the skin right to the top of my ear, buzzed to fuzz another half inch, and an inch long layer to the temple level with my brow, the rest

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of it flowed straight and long across my head and down to the center of my back in a modified Mohawk that spread to the width of my temples as opposed to a simple narrow stripe down the middle of my head. I'd brushed it over to the right, and it arched across perfectly, leaving a curtain I could hide behind I wanted, or to be pushed back if I didn't.

Right now?

I didn't.

My main mission accomplished, I checked the rest out. There was no need to worry about makeup. I rarely wore it, with the exception of a little eyeliner and mascara every now and then—hey, that stuff will ruin your skin, ya know. And I inspected my clothes, making sure everything was where it was supposed to be.

Skin tight black cotton and Lycra covered my body from throat to not quite mid-thigh, with sleeves that came to my wrists. I twisted to see my back: yup, everything was in place, or not, depending on your point of view. I was covered in the front, but the back was open to my waist, and the sleeve-tops were cut out in such a way that my shoulders, shaped from years of swimming and a few other sports, were bare to the top of the tricep. Sheer black stockings, calf-high black riding boots and a simple, silver ank on a black velvet choker around my neck completed the outfit.

I like the look, it's working for me, I thought. It was definitely a female look, no mistaking that, but not, you know, girly. Strong, yes; maybe even a little dangerous. I liked it. *Woman with an edge*, I thought to myself, and nodded slightly with satisfaction.

It was my night off. I was buzzed just enough to feel good but not out of it, and filled with restless energy that dancing with a pretty girl only stoked hotter and higher, making my skin tingle. I was definitely ready for anything, and I wasn't going to merely wait for it to come my way.

A face reflected next to mine in the mirror. "Hey—fancy meeting you here." It smiled at me.

"Small world, it is." I smiled in return at the reflection of my dance partner, and ran my fingers through my hair quickly, just to make sure nothing was out of place.

I faced her head on, leaning my back against the little ledge that ran the length of the mirror, and crossed one booted leg over the other. Of course I

had a “cool” attitude—bathroom or no, this was my place to work, to hang out: my world, my territory.

I couldn't help the amused grin I wore as I watched her check her makeup, decide it was okay, then make a quick inspection of her hair. In the bright light of the ladies room, it turned out to be light brown with a few blonde streaks in it and whether that was from the sun or chemistry, was up to the eye and mind of the beholder.

However it got that way didn't matter, though. In my beholding eye, she was definitely, no doubt about it, very pretty and she had great legs, too.

“I don't mean to sound trite, ” she said, “but have we met? Before, I mean? You seem so very familiar.”

There was a musical lilt to her voice, a very slight accent to her words, as she spoke to me, a little half smile in place. The quirk of her lips told me she wanted to play that old game.

Ah, but I was feeling just too good, and there are some games I don't like to play, especially old ones. But...if she wanted to play...

We'd do it *my* way.

I merely arched an eyebrow at her and re-crossed my legs.

“Funny you should say that,” I answered, glancing casually down at my nails before looking back up at her. “Because I know exactly where I've seen *you* before.” I straightened and put my hand out. “I'm—”

“Nina!” Trace came calling into the bathroom, “Richie asked if you could take over for Darrel—he's sick or something.” She barely glanced at Blue as she walked right past her and slid next to me by the mirror. “He said he'll pay you double your shift, just remind him at the end of the night.”

Trace stopped herself a moment and her gaze raked me up and down appraisingly, as if she hadn't just seen me ten minutes before.

I returned her perusal with a bland look; her inspection bothered me.

“Very good look for you, by the way,” she said and smiled, then lifted slender fingers to tweak the forelock that fell over my cheek. “God, you're so fucking cute,” she added, cupping my chin.

Her steel grey eyes locked with mine a moment, and the longer the moment held, the more my discomfort grew. It was just a little too close for comfort.

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Her intensity pulled at me, began to cut through my shell and even as I felt the muscles grow tight in my neck, I tried to talk myself down, away, and just somehow out from the feeling that swelled within me.

She always does this, she doesn't mean anything by it, I reminded myself by fixing the image of her draped over Van's lap firmly in my head.

She'd approach that edge between flirting and more, although she'd never outright proposition me, then pull something like, well, making out with Van. Honestly, it always made me feel pretty darn rotten, like if I'd just done this, that, or the other thing, she'd be with me instead of whoever.

Tonight though, instead of making me feel bad, it was just pissing me off.

"Thanks," I answered shortly and twisted my head away from her hand.

I scowled at the mirror, checking my hair. I hated my hair being messed up, I hated my head being messed with, and I hated being called "cute."

Teddy bears were cute. Puppies and ducklings? *They* were "cute."

My mother thought I was cute, but then again, my mother also wanted me to be straight—we were working on that: my mom understanding, that is, not my being straight.

Fuck that, and fuck cute.

I didn't want to be cute, I wanted to be hot. Woman with an edge, dammit, not Li'l Bo fuckin' Peep. And besides, she was making me lose points in front of this girl.

Cute.

Damn.

You know, points are all about the respect of your peers and your chances of getting laid.

That's it.

Period.

On the imaginary scoreboard, "cute" was dismissible, not desirable. Cute and horny did not, do not, and will never go together.

Hot, though...

That's something else altogether. Hot gets some, cute gets a pat on the head. Did I mention that I hate that? I felt like Trace was trying to say, or rather imply, that I was a teddy bear with teeth, and how ridiculous is that?

But, I didn't let any of that show. My boss needed an answer, and Trace was waiting to deliver it. *What the hell,* I thought to myself, *I could lose*

myself in the music. This was always a good thing as far as I was concerned, plus I could earn a few extra bucks towards a guitar I wanted.

Work was work, I decided, and besides, I was only a little buzzed, just enough to feel the edge. As long as I didn't drink anything fermented for the rest of the night, I'd be fine. It's not as if I was operating heavy machinery or driving, anyway.

"Tell Richie I said yeah, and see if he can have Darrel cue up the next one, I'll be there in half a minute," I directed.

I decided to not to theorize out loud exactly why Darrel was suddenly so ill he couldn't spin tunes anymore. Just between you and me, though, my suspicion was one too many Jell-O shots mixed with some pharmacology up in the booth.

"I just want to—" I indicated my hair to her.

"Oh my God, you're Nina, the DJ!" Blue interrupted excitedly from behind Trace's shoulder. "I'm here every Friday and Saturday you spin the Elemental Experience, and for your Experience-the-Experiment Wednesdays!"

Her eyes were wide with recognition (or admiration or something that at that time I didn't recognize), and those eyes looking over Trace's shoulder were green, like a pine forest at dusk—and I've always been a sucker for dark green eyes.

But sure, right, like she didn't know who I was before, I thought to myself a little cynically with an inward smile. I remembered what nights Darrel and I had both seen her—and debated which of us she'd rather date.

I told Darrel I didn't fucking care one way or another, but I didn't tell him I'd have put the money on me.

Outwardly, I grinned at her anyway over Trace's shoulder, and Trace spun so quickly to face her, I'm surprised she didn't hurt the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized. "Didn't mean to interrupt."

Trace didn't seem the least bit repentant in my opinion as I watched her check the girl out for herself. "Okay well, " she addressed me, her inspection complete. "I'm gonna drop off your message and grab everyone. See you in a few," and she strode off to the door. "Oh, one last thing?" she poked her head back in. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She smiled evilly at me as she nodded her chin toward Blue.

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I cocked an eyebrow back at her. “That leaves me with a lot of options, you know.” I shook my head in mock confusion.

Trace just kept smiling her wise-ass smile at me and disappeared from the door.

I took a step in that direction myself, then stopped. I glanced over my shoulder at Blue and that incendiary dress. I didn’t want to just leave her hanging. She seemed nice enough and the lines she used *could* have just been a casual, sincere attempt at conversation.

Besides, that would have been rude. Right?

Right.

“Hey, I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta go,” I excused myself and gave her a smile. “Work calls. It was very nice meeting you. See you out on the dance floor.” I returned through the corridor to the back room.

Darrel had left a slow ambient track flowing through the sound system and the dance floor lit by a dim orange-red glow. The last tune had left the room filled with a dark and throbbing energy, a low and restless feeling that was not so much sexual as sensual, but lacking joy.

Darrel’s brought these people down, where am I going to bring them? I asked myself as I made my way to the booth in the very back corner of the room. I opened the door and went up three steps to my little world...

This little square in the sky, the “sky box” as we sometimes called the DJ booth, was surrounded by walls on three sides, and the front that faced the dance floor had a sturdy bench that held the soundboard, microphone and headset, two turntables, a disc player going from the middle to the right, all the way to the wall, and a space for discs, drinks, or sometimes, dates, all the way to the left.

A Plexiglass wall separated the DJ from the crowd, so that whoever was spinning could observe and be observed, but still have that illusion of separation. Except for the empty space all the way to the left—there was no Plexi there, because that’s where people could call up requests or attempt to talk with the DJ, and the waitress could drop off water or whatever other substance that was requested.

The back wall was filled with bins of records and discs, as was the space under the turntables. I flipped through the discs Darrel had set aside. *No, no, no*, I thought as I quickly discarded each selection, *not where I’m going*.

JD GLASS

What the hell had he been thinking? Sure, the music he had picked was decent, but there was no direction, no theme, not even a unifying mood, except for the bleakness his ambient tune was setting.

I had a few more minutes to pull out the next few tunes that would create the mood I wanted, but there was no way I could just abruptly alter the environment Darrel had created, even if it was confused. That would have been terribly uncomfortable for the people out there, and would leave them feeling disoriented.

No, I was going to evolve it, bring them down, all the way down, then raise them to where I wanted them to be, the fall and the redemption, all in one night; and I'd provide the soundtrack that would guide them all the way through.

I ran my fingers lightly through the racks, pulling this disc out, discarding the next, setting it up and in order: the songs, the occasional patter, the lighting.

I was set.

I took my selections and instead of placing them on the prep area, I placed them on the stool before the turn table so I could make faster changes that way. Besides, since all I had to move were my hands, I wouldn't have to break my groove.

It's always a good sign if the DJ's dancing too. But this arrangement had another benefit: it made me less accessible to the crowd, since I almost never had to step directly in front of that open space.

Under the counter itself was a small shelf (and under that was a waste basket) with paper towels, electrical odds and ends, and baby wipes, you know, pre-moistened and soaped towelettes, but without the lotion, and I grabbed one of those, quickly wiping my hands free of any detritus they may have picked up. Hey, have to keep those discs clean, you know.

My hands now lemony-fresh, I placed the headset around my neck so that I could reach the phones up to my ears without messing up my hair and set up the first disc, listening for the groove I wanted to slide myself into. Oh yeah, that low dark throb I was going to take down, all the way low down through, then twist it up. *Take that moment and dance, baby*, I thought as I brought the faders up for the first piece I'd selected.

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I raised my eyes from the board to scan through the room and feel the vibe, and I watched as Trace and Van ambled through the crowd and into the dance area, settling in a spot about fifteen feet away from the booth.

Trace waved to me then pointed. I followed the line of sight she drew out for me and saw Blue dancing her way over to the booth. I looked back at Trace and shrugged my shoulders.

“So...what?” I mouthed back at her.

Trace just smiled back at me and, maintaining eye contact, she slowly and deliberately snaked out her tongue to lick Van’s neck.

Why did I keep looking as his eyes fluttered shut?

Though I couldn’t hear it, I could feel the groan that came from his lips. Still watching me watch her, Trace proceeded to trail up into his ear. At that point, his arms came up and around her, and they were mauling each other again.

I shook my head and broke the eye contact. I didn’t have time for this shit, I had work to do. I snapped my headset firmly around my neck and slid it over my ears, careful not to mess my hair—which is why it went around my neck and up as opposed to on my head and down in the first place. I smoothly set my mix, letting the heavy opening cadence of that first tune fill my head and the room.

I took a breath and let it out slowly. It was time. I reached for the microphone, and keyed it open. “Darrel and the Daze have left the building for the night,” I intoned solemnly. “You are now...” I let the first riff swell through and I watched with a small smile of satisfaction as the music started to take effect.

“In...” I let the chords build through and conquer the older tune as it faded out of hearing.

“Dominion,” I breathed, letting the song of the same name sweep at volume through the room.

This was another Sisters of Mercy tune, and by the by, Sisters of Mercy are a very cool band, sort of, well, dark and moody and dance-able all at the same time, which I definitely recommend you check out—try the *Floodland* album.

But still, what a tune to pick for first choice, I reflected. Boy, I was in some mood.

I set the lights to give off a bit of a flicker, since there's nothing like the "dungeon-disco" effect, and checking my mix for the next tune, I closed my eyes and sank into the groove myself, at peace and at home in my little musical world, feeling fine, just fine, thank you. Of course that moment of peace couldn't last. What is it they say, "when you least expect it, expect it?"

I felt a gentle touch on the bare skin of my back and as I opened my eyes, a hand holding plastic cup of water appeared before me. That was nice. Wow, sometimes Trace could really set me off, and sometimes she could be just so damn sweet, so considerate, it drove me fuckin' crazy.

It was like she'd been raised in my home—nobody ever said they were sorry—okay, well, my parents would force us to say it if we got caught doing something, but otherwise, nobody ever said those words; they "did" it instead.

For example, say my brother Nico and I had an argument and it was his fault? Later on, he'd come over to me and say something like, "Hey um, wanna go play some video games? My treat," or if it was me, I'd catch up with him and hand him a cup of hot chocolate or something. Our parents did it too, I mean, if they were "wrong" (which, of course, never happened), they'd pick up a book one of us wanted or take that person out for a Saturday afternoon, something along those lines.

We "did" it—we didn't just say it.

Well, okay, I was known to say it on occasions, but I always backed it up with an action because "actions speak louder than words."

Trace "did" it, too, although she might every now and then say it, but usually not. I took the cup and gratefully tossed back and swallowed more than half of it before I realized it was a tequila pop (tequila and 7 Up in case you were wondering) and not merely plain water.

As the combination of sourness and soda fizzled against the back of my throat, my eyes opened wider and I automatically gulped down what was left in my mouth before handing the cup back.

"Hey, thanks, Trace, but I'm not drink—" I stopped cold.

It wasn't Trace—it was Blue.

I was momentarily speechless as I pushed my headset off from my ears. No one, ever, and I mean *ever*, had entered that booth before that I either didn't know or didn't personally invite. This was unheard of. This was—

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“Your friend let me in,” she told me, neatly plucking the cup from my fingers with a smile. “She figured you wouldn’t mind.”

A set-up. That’s what this was. I looked back out into the room and didn’t have to scan far. Trace was right by the “request” window, smirking at me, and I leveled my eyes at hers as I leaned over to catch her ear.

“Trace, what the fuck?” I asked her in a loud whisper. Invading my domain and all—sheesh, you know?

Trace tweaked my hair again. “You’re so fucking cute when you’re mad,” she laughed, then reached up and kissed me, full on the lips. Her lips were soft and full, and they pressed oh-so-hard against mine. When she finally let go, she bit my lip.

I tasted blood.

“If you did some of the things I would—” she stroked my cheek “—you’d have more fun.” Trace drew a finger across my lip, taking the red stain she’d left with it, and I watched, angry, stirred, and mesmerized, as she slid it between her lips.

What was wrong with me, that I let her get to me like that? I couldn’t stop her if I wanted to, and I wasn’t sure I did.

Trace smiled as she brought her hand down. “Mmm...delicious,” she commented, then smirked at me. “Now go have fun—I absolutely fuckin’ dare you.”

Her smile turned wicked: a flash of teeth, eyes sparking her challenge. She held my eyes a moment, then gave me her back, dismissing me.

My mind swirled as I straightened up and turned around to face my “guest,” and as the carbonation burned through my stomach, I felt the tequila send a flush through my body, warming my skin, and thrumming in my chest.

Blue simply observed me, cup in hand and eyes narrowed in consideration. “I told your friend I wanted to speak with you, and she said she’d help me out, since she’d interrupted...” she paused a moment and put the cup down on the ledge behind her “...our earlier conversation.” She stepped closer to narrow the short distance between us.

Okay, so this game was a little different than I thought it would be. I wasn’t expecting this more, well, forward sort of behavior. And okay though, maybe that was my fault: I’d been the one to start changing the

rules, anyway. Her hand reached out and I stepped back a little nervously, smacking back against my soundboard.

Oh yeah, the soundboard. I was working—or supposed to be, anyway. “Okay yeah, sure,” I agreed and smiled. “We can talk. I, um, I’ve got to set my tunes,” and I gave my attention to the board.

We were so close to one another my hip brushed against hers as I turned. Did I mention this wasn’t a very big space to begin with?

I slipped my headphones back on and checked the play status on the disc.

Everything was going smoothly and exactly where I wanted it to go. I ran nimble fingers across the dials then grabbed the next two discs, setting them up in succession—they would fade beautifully into one another. I closed my eyes as I tested the mix, listening, sinking into the music’s mood, my fingertips resting lightly on the knobs as I adjusted the program, tweaking a bit here and there to get it just right. Oh yeah, there it was. This was going to be nice, very nice. I swayed along with the beat and set a few automatic times, still tweaking the sound and moments until they were perfect.

A soft fingertip slid slowly down my bare back and it took a lot to control the light shiver it caused. Hands strayed to my hips and Blue danced with me. I could feel the heat of her body on my back as I locked the mix on the board, and as we swayed in time together, I realized she was slightly taller than me.

She was subtle as she pressed up against me, and I felt the light touch of her lips on my neck as I caught the rhythm with her and swayed to the beat. She nibbled her way up to my ear.

God, I *love* that...

Well, if I hadn’t been stirred before—which I was—this situation had just jumped me up a little higher, but it was time, more than time, to take it in hand.

Maintaining body contact, I twisted around, and, glancing up at her eyes for a moment, grasped her hips, bringing us closer. We moved together for a few moments, then I brushed my lips up along the line of her neck, then to just under and behind her ear. She inhaled sharply and I couldn’t help but smile at that.

I *love* it when things work the way they should.

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“I have to check the board,” I whispered, lightly kissing the skin right below.

“How are you going to do that if I don’t let you go?” she murmured into my hair, readjusting the grip she had and holding me firmly.

I brushed my lower lip against her ear lobe, then looked up into her eyes. “Just like this.” I grinned and neatly sliding my leg between hers, I pulled her in closer and pivoted, using our combined weight for leverage.

I controlled her descent by holding her hips and her back landed neatly and with the slightest heaviness to the left of the board. Now I could face the room, if I wanted, and the controls.

But God damn, though, that system had good shocks: the sound never skipped through the room.

“This work for you?” I asked her with a smile, releasing her hips so I could bring up my headphones. As I leaned over and across her to reach for the console and the microphone so I could introduce the next song, my lower body pressed into hers.

She hooked a leg around my hip and reached up, pressing her breasts against me and burrowing her lips into my neck. “This works just fine for me,” she breathed out.

“Good,” I whispered, enjoying the pattern she was weaving on my throat.

What can I say? I guess I’m just a sensualist at heart. “Shhh,” I cautioned, indicating the microphone as I brought it up.

She paused a moment and nodded against me. I set my headphones in place, I keyed the mic.

“Brothers and sisters, boyz and grrls, lovers and leavers, this is the Dominion,” I informed the dancers as my eyes scanned the now-crowded floor.

Oh wow!

A lot of people had come in to the back room since I’d started, drawn by the music. Hey, all was cool, it meant they liked it and that I was doing my job well.

Blue slipped her leg up between mine and pressed it firmly where it meant business, and there was not a doubt in my mind about what kind of business she meant.

The throb that flew threw my body mixed in with the music and the buzz I already had, and a low and throaty “Mmph” escaped from my lips and into the room as I set the sound flying and returned the pressure Blue was sending my way.

We spent a few more moments like that, moving with one another to a beat that was sensual to begin with and heated further by our contact, so when she set herself along the small available space on the board and arched her neck back, quicker than it takes to tell, she dropped the leg that was pressed against me and I was between hers.

Still dancing, just a slight movement of hips and shoulders, I dipped my head to the line that ran the length of her throat and traced it very softly with my lips until I reached hers. I gently nipped at her lower lip requesting access, and received it.

Her lips tasted like cherry-flavored balm and her tongue had that sweet beer taste. Blue was definitely good at kissing, and as my hands made their way along her ribs, I felt a hand run up and down my back and sides, and one snaked into the space where our bodies met.

Tempting, very tempting, but not where I wanted to go: not in this place, not on these terms. She wanted to play and this was now my game. Carefully, I took her hand away from me and my lips from hers.

I gazed into her eyes and whispered, “No, baby,” bringing her hand to my shoulder and holding it there. “This is all about you.”

I reached for her mouth with mine, and I brought my hands around her hips, massaging her gorgeously firm ass.

She moaned into my mouth and gripped my ribs with her knees. Gently, almost lazily, I encircled her waist, and drew a soft line along her thigh with my free hand until it was under what was left of her skirt. She’d already pushed it up and mostly out of the way.

Skirts are great sometimes, ya know? I like ’em—lots.

My fingertip grazed the spot where the thigh meets the body, and I stopped kissing her for a moment and stilled my hands to consider—what exactly, I’m not sure—but this was going a bit further than I’d originally intended.

Raising my head, I scanned the room once again. Everyone was grooving, the mood was working, both in the room and definitely in the

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sky box. A hand waved in the air and caught my eye—Trace, trying to get my attention. I nodded and gave her a small smile.

“I dare you!” she mouthed at me.

I smiled back at her and shook my head. “Fuck you!” I mouthed back with a grin and a roll of my eyes.

“I’m not the one you’re fucking!” Trace yelled back as she laughed.

She spun Van around until they were both out from my line of sight.

Blue merely waited for me, gently stroking my ribs as I removed my hands, and I took advantage of the moment to make some last small adjustments to the board: I had a ten-minute song followed again by an eleven-and-a-half minute one. The music would be good to go for a decent length of time without my direct attention.

Blue’s legs relaxed a bit and rested on my hips.

I reached for the last set of knobs that would lock my current settings when suddenly, Trace was at the request window. I raised my eyes to look at her. “What?” I asked silently with an interested arch of a brow.

“You’re such a baby, just so really fucking adorable, you know that?” she yelled up at me with an evil smile, then danced away.

Goddam, how did she manage to always fuckin’ do that to me? I reached blindly over for my cup of water and drank unthinkingly, forgetting—again—that it wasn’t water but what was left of the tequila pop. The drink was like acid in the back of my throat and I let it burn all the way down.

Fuck it, I thought as I finished it and tossed the cup into the pail under the board. I stood there a moment staring at nothing, letting everything run through me, burning like the tequila—the frustration with Trace, the arousal from Blue, and the normal restlessness that rides everyone’s blood on a summer night. Okay, maybe that’s just hormones, but you know what I mean.

Maybe the moon was full, or I’d had more to drink than I thought. Could be I was still a little annoyed, maybe even a little raw about the “cute” comment. I don’t know why I had such a need to have Trace see me differently (okay, maybe I do know now, but let’s just move on) but I was scanning the dance floor, finding Trace’s cold grey eyes and holding them with my own.

Blue’s arms reached and twined her arms around my neck and I tangled my hands into her hair, drawing her head back. My lips were almost on her

throat, just a breath away, before I broke that eye contact with Trace, and this time, it was definitely on my terms.

Cute this, I thought as I brought my teeth to bare along the column of Blue's throat and my hands were in the mix, too. I had both of them by the twin junctions of her thighs, and was alternately gently scraping along their length with my nails (yes, I keep them short, but not bitten) and massaging the firm muscle.

Blue was busy, too. Gratifyingly responsive to my kisses and caresses, she hungrily and skillfully licked and sucked on my neck, her hands tracing the contours of my face, her knees now firm against my ribs.

I lifted my head away from the assault, then dipped it, questing for her mouth. My hands rested lightly on her parted thighs and as I slid my tongue between her welcoming lips, I softly brushed my thumbs along the narrow strip of material that held her secrets. She gasped into my mouth and her body surged forward. I pressed my thumbs harder against her and could feel the valley she wanted to welcome me into under the damp material.

"Are you sure?" I whispered into her ear, interrupting our meeting of the mouths, and she bit my neck in response.

Burying my lips into Blue's neck, I lifted the flimsy material away with my right hand and stroked over the fine damp hairs that lined her cleft with my left. Her clit was hard and wanted my attention, and I complied, sliding my thumbs around its base, stroking it.

She was soft and slick, swollen with want and wide open to me. Turning my left hand palm-up, I poised my index and middle fingers right at her wet and welcoming entrance.

She moaned softly and leaned back upon her elbows, her head hanging back between her shoulders.

I leaned forward over her and once again slid my free arm around her waist. She brought her head up to mine and I kissed her softly. "Are you sure?" I murmured into her lips. "We can stop if you want."

She grabbed my wrist. "Please Nina," she asked, and kissed me deeply. "Fuck me," she whispered into my ear, and as she leaned back again, she pulled me with her, but still I stayed my hand, at her entrance, but not in it. "Just fuck me."

Hey, you never deny a lady a direct request, right?

Right.

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I kissed her again, slowly, was gentle as I explored the lovely rich wetness between her lips. With small and steady movements, relishing the feel of her, I entered by slow degrees, getting to know her, making sure she was more than ready. When the very tips of my fingers were inside her, I felt more than heard her anticipatory groan. That, and the complete opening of body—you know what I mean, that sudden, total, there're-just-no-barriers-here-I'm-wide-open-to-you welcome that tells you “*Now, right now!*” were the cue I wanted, had been waiting for. It's always, in all ways, all about timing.

I pulled her closer to me and in one swift, almost savage movement, slid my tongue all the way into her mouth, pressed my thumb hard against her clit and my fingers almost as far as they could go into her pussy.

She gasped and shuddered, gripping the edge of the bench with both hands and bringing one knee straight back, she stretched the length of her leg over my shoulder. I slid even deeper inside that slick, tight, space, and the rhythm I set was fast and furious, the time for formality and shyness way over.

I felt her pussy tighten around my fingers and instead of sliding in and out, I stayed deep within her, moving easily through her wetness, fucking her with short thrusts as her hips pushed back against me.

“That's it, baby...” I whispered. “That's it.”

Encouraged, she groaned, grabbing the edge of the board with one hand, a leg now pinning my arm, a heel dug into my ass, and she groped around for something else to hold onto. She grabbed the microphone.

“Oh yeah baby...*fuck* me like that...just...like...that,” she groaned out, chest heaving, her body a glorious wave.

Using my hips, I pressed further into her, the weight of my body against hers adding intensity to the pressure on her clit and the fingers inside.

Her pussy tightened again, a hot suck on my fingers as she undulated against and beneath me. My clit, already throbbing, jumped with intensity. I love, I mean, really *love*, the feeling of a woman getting ready to come.

“You're so tight,” I whispered throatily. “Go ahead, squeeze me baby, hold me in you.” She was gonna come and I was making sure she was would, but *good*.

Fucking *hard*, and fucking *good*.

I increased the pace.

Blue let out a small high-pitched gasp and grit her teeth a moment. I painted stripes along her neck with my tongue, then found a spot to focus on. Nibbling and sucking, I stayed there, and realized she was speaking, chanting something, over and over.

“So *good*, so fuckin’ *good*...” she ground out repeatedly through her teeth. The sound of her fuck-heavy voice seemed to surround me, and for whatever reason, I looked up a moment.

Suddenly I realized there I was, stretched across this girl, buried deep in her cunt, the knee on my shoulder pressed almost all the way back to hers, her head and shoulders thrown back against the Plexiglass and the microphone keyed in her clenched hand.

Her pussy kept rocking, sucking my fingers, then started to spasm, squeezing and releasing. “Oh yeah, yeah,” she gasped out, and as her voice husked over the rhythm that played in the room I thrust in her hard, fast and steady.

I found Trace’s eyes upon me as she stood still upon the dance floor, the only one not dancing, really, and Van had seemingly departed to parts unknown. He’d probably gone for another drink or to the bathroom, I briefly figured. Trace crossed her arms over her chest and there was definite anger on her face as she watched me.

But fuck her—this moment wasn’t about her.

Blue cried out, a beautifully sensual breathy sound that floated out and over the dancers, mixing perfectly with the beat in the room and with a final surge of motion, her body rose up, sealing her chest against mine, her legs coming down tightly around my waist. She released her grip on the bench and tossed the mic to parts unknown, then put both hands on my face, bringing our mouths together.

She sent that gorgeous primal cry down my throat as I felt the waves go through her. I wrapped my arm even tighter around her, supporting her, holding her close and my fingers still while her pussy softened and relaxed, while Blue buried her lips into my neck, whimpering softly.

“Shhh,” I soothed and I rocked her gently against me for a few moments, murmuring nonsense into her hair, hearing her breathing ease. Her arms wrapped loosely around my shoulders and I very carefully withdrew my fingers from within her.

“Boy!” she exclaimed airily as we came apart.

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I cocked my head and arched an eyebrow at her. “Not hardly,” I grinned. She caught the grin and smiled back and after a moment, we both laughed.

“For which I’m thankful,” she responded, laughing some more.

She hopped off the bench and straightened out her skirt. The scent of sex, her sex, hung in the box as I dug under the bench for the baby-wipes. Now I knew why Darrel always made sure we had plenty.

I grabbed a few out and turned. “Here,” I reached up and gently wiped the light sheen that glowed on her skin from her face and neck. “How’s that?”

Blue took my hand and kissed the palm. “Very nice, thank you,” she smiled.

“It certainly was.” I smiled in return. “Thank *you*.”

I took my hand back and in moments, both of them were lemony-fresh again. I gave the board a quick glance to make sure all was good in the world, and Blue turned to make her way to the door.

“Hey, where you going?” I asked her, slightly confused. Hadn’t she originally said she wanted to talk?

“I guess...I should...um, let you work, right?” She smiled at me, but the smile didn’t seem all the way right, and her eyes questioned me.

Oh no, this was going to turn into drama very soon if I wasn’t careful. “Hang out a sec?” “It’s okay,” I reassured her with a smile to the mute question I could read in her eyes.

I decided to scan the room—I wanted to catch the waitress’s eye—and when I finally did, I waved her over. She deftly picked her way through the crowd to the request window.

“Hey Andra. “I need a plain cran and orange juice and—” I looked over my shoulder “—what are you drinking?” I asked Blue.

She had to at least be thirsty, right?

Besides, she *was* a guest in my booth.

“Corona.” She smiled at me, and this time her smile seemed genuine, or at the very least, relieved.

“A Corona,” and I glanced back over my shoulder with a grin, “with lime,” I finished.

Just in case you don’t already know, Corona is a beer, and that’s the way you drink it. Why? I don’t really know, because I don’t really like beer—I’m

more of a mixed drinks or wine type of girl. But I'm told that it's good, and that's the way everyone seems to like it best. Try it if you haven't already, but drink responsibly: make sure you have someone around to stop you from puking on your own shoes.

"I'll be right back with that." Andra smiled up and batted her heavily-lashed eyes at me. "Anything else? Are you sure you're um..." she raised her eyebrows "...satisfied?"

Huh. What do you know—I'd always suspected Andra might have been flirting with me, now I knew for sure.

Cool.

"Hey, I'm just getting started." I grinned back with a quirk of my lips "But thanks—I'm totally fine."

"So we hear," she shot back, now smiling widely. She turned to go, then turned back a moment. "I like your mix tonight, you've really got the um, mood..." I watched her mouth as she ran her tongue along her teeth "...going." She favored me with a smoky look, then slid back into the writhing throng.

"Thanks," I called out to her retreating form.

I glanced at my meters and turned back to Blue, who had made herself comfortable along the back bench.

"Listen, I've got about forty-five seconds to set my next mix. Just hang back here a moment, go through the discs, see if there's some tunes you'd like to hear. I'll see if I can fit them in, okay?" I asked her with a smile.

I didn't want her to think that I'd fucked her and wanted to forget her (not my style, and I wasn't Darrel, after all), but I really did have to spend some attention to my job—I *was* supposed to be working and all that.

I focused on the board and reset my headphones. *Andra's right*, I mused, swaying to the beat. *This is a seriously good groove.* I checked the next tune and set my fades and timers for the next insert. I hadn't spoken to the room for a bit, so it was time to be a little more interactive—with the whole room, I mean.

I reached for the microphone.

Fuck.

Where was my microphone?

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Finally, I sighted the wire trailing across the board, where it had been tossed over the dividing screen. I grinned to myself. Well hell, if it had gotten wrecked, at least it had been for a good cause, I figured.

Slowly reeling it back, I placed it carefully down where I needed it, checked my volumes again, and listened for my entrance. Okay, there it was. I eased the fade in, the end of one song lowing into the beginning of the next. I'd already brought the mood down as far as I wanted it to go. The one that was about to end had started the climb back up, and this next one would cement that move.

I reached for the microphone and keyed it. "Fellow freaks and frenzied followers." I brought the mix up slightly and the volume down a bit "You are in the Dominion with Nina," I reminded them.

Whoops, hollers, and applause broke out across the room, and I stared out at the crowd as the dancers all paused to cheer me in the skybox. Usually, when I announced songs or just uttered some encouraging enthusiastic phrase, I got some enthusiastic hollers, but this—this was a standing ovation.

I was honestly and momentarily stunned.

"Do it, Nina!" someone yelled out over the music.

I was shocked out of my daze, and my ears burned with embarrassment because I was pretty sure that was not a reference to my DJing, although it could have been. Most people looked at the floor and each other when they danced, and they couldn't really see anything behind the partition except for heads. Anything they'd heard they probably thought was just part of the mix, add-ins by the DJ to enhance the music and the mood. It seemed to have worked, intentionally or not.

"Experience Dominion!" another person yelled, and the crowd picked up the cry until it became a chant that reoccurred over the closing strains of music and beat that flowed through the room.

"Dominion! Dominion!" The sound from the eager dancers seemed to swell and grow.

I placed my hands on the board and looked out at the crowd a moment longer: their attention firmly on the sky box, and not on the music apparently. Hoo boy. I'd started something I'd had no intentions of even beginning, and I wasn't sure of how to go on or what they were asking for.

Scratch that.

I knew.

Fuck it.

This wasn't something I'd normally play with, but I was feeling reckless anyway, and the burning in my ears was nothing compared to the burning in my skin or the rising flood threatening to overwhelm me that being with Blue had done nothing to stem.

I set my headphones firmly, set a hand on a fader and keyed the mic. I brought the level up as I spoke. "Is that what you want?" I asked the room in a low and throaty voice.

Cheers broke out.

"Are you sure?" I pressed them in the same low voice, bringing the fader up a bit more. The mix was still in the background, but now discernable through the other song.

More cheers and applause answered me.

I checked my timing, and went with the rhythm. "Fine then," I purred out.

Careful now, timing, that's what it's all about, I reminded myself, listening for the entrance.

"Have it."

I brought the faders up on full and the mix was complete. The room was off and grooving and I grooved along with them to the music. I pulled out the next few selections and set the tune that would follow on the board, checking my levels for time and volume.

Andra had come back with our drinks and set them in the request window. Done with my board for the moment, I picked them up: a cup of cran and orange for me, a bottle of Corona for Blue and, wait—there was a third?

Yes, another cup of what looked like cranberry juice and orange.

"Thanks," I told Andra, who had waited to make sure I saw the drinks. "Who's this for?" I asked, pointing to the second cup I had left on the ledge.

"For you," Andra grinned, "in case you're too busy...um...*grooving*, to remember to get another."

"That was very cool of you, thanks," I smiled back. It was true; that was both cool and nice of her to do.

"You're very welcome," she answered. "Oh, and by the way?" She stuffed a piece of paper into the hand that held the cran and orange cup. "You can

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start with me, anytime.” She gave me an appraisingly smoky look, then walked away.

Stunned, I blushed then managed to collect myself. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I called to her back and grinned. Andra turned around, gave me a saucy smile, then wove her way through the dancers back to the main bar.

I shook my head.

Yep, definitely flirting, I thought, bemused.

I turned, drinks in hand and found Blue still sitting along the back bench, and she favored me with a smile as I handed her the beer.

“Thanks for your patience,” I said and grinned at her, holding my cup up in toast.

“No worries,” she grinned back at me. “You’ll want to keep that,” she pointed with her beer.

“Keep what?” I asked, confused.

“That...” she reached over and plucked the paper I’d forgotten out from between my hand and my drink. She folded it neatly and tucked it into my sleeve, stroking my wrist as she did so. “You’ll want to keep it,” she grinned at me. “She’s very pretty.”

I wasn’t sure of what exactly to say so I thought it wise to say nothing and merely gave her a little smile of my own. Sometimes, it’s the only thing you can do.

Blue merely smiled wider, then clinked the top of her bottle against my cup. I gratefully lifted the cup to my mouth and drank, the juice nice and cool, soothing even, as it made its way down my throat.

Surprisingly, I was thirstier than I thought and drank rather quickly, so it was only somewhere between the second and third swallows that I realized there was more than juice in my cup. *Ah well,* I shook my head mentally, *there went stopping for the rest of the night.*

I finally settled myself back along the ledge next to Blue so we could actually chat a moment; while the mix I had on wasn’t terribly long, at least not as long as the ones I’d had on before, it was long enough that I could actually take a break if I wanted.

“So...do I detect a bit of an accent?” I turned to her and asked, remarking on the slight lilt she had in her voice. I’d noticed it much earlier actually, but this was the first chance I’d had to ask about it. We had been rather...um...distracted.

“Um, yes.” She glanced down. “Most don’t hear it,” she said finally, looking at me with what I suspected were pink cheeks and a faint grin.

“Ah, well, most don’t spend all their time listening for inflections in sound.” I smiled at her. “I tend to hear things others don’t. It’s charming, by the way,” I added with honest admiration. “It adds this lovely little roll to your voice. It’s really quite musical.”

This time she was definitely blushing. “No one’s ever told me that before. What a nice thing to say,” she finally said, and she studied me seriously.

I let her inspect me for a moment, not sure why she was so somber. And it was true, about her voice, I mean. The lilt underneath her words made everything she said lyrical, so why shouldn’t I mention it? It was lovely, even a bit sexy.

The silence grew a moment longer. “Something wrong?” I cocked a brow and asked lightly. The mood was getting way too serious, and I wasn’t comfortable. I also wouldn’t let it continue if could help it.

Blue seemed to give an inward shake and collected herself. She shook her head. “No nothing.” She nodded, then took a sip of her beer. “It’s just, you’re not just trying to charm me, are you?” she stated more than asked.

I focused my gaze on her with greater intent because that confused me. Charm? For what? I didn’t get it—what the fuck was that all about? All I’d said was that her voice was lovely. Oh, she meant... Well, wouldn’t I have done that before we, um, I, uh, well, you know, before I let someone use my microphone for distance tossing? and I said as much.

Blue sighed, almost grinning in relief. “You’ve a point there, don’t you?” she commented, and rubbed my thigh.

I felt the strength of her fingers run up and down the muscle, then lightly took her hand in mine, and twisted a bit on the bench to face her. The flood that had risen through me before was starting to ebb, and I think I was finally starting to feel a little normal again—whatever that was.

I took a small sip of my drink and considered, then took another. Nope, it really wasn’t just juice. Funny how you couldn’t tell right away.

Finally, I put the drink down on the bench behind me, then faced Blue again. “So,” I began with a smile and her hand delicate and warm in mine. I lightly touched my fingertips of my freehand to hers. “You still haven’t told me where you’re from.”

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Blue laughed, a sensual and somehow sophisticated sound. “I’m from the UK.” The curve of her lip was undeniably attractive as she spoke. “I’m spending the summer holiday here on the advice of a friend, well, an ex, um, sort of.” She grinned, but seemed slightly embarrassed.

I can’t tell you why, but I found that attractive, too.

“You know how these things can be,” she added.

I nodded in polite agreement. In reality, I didn’t—know, that is. I dated, I occasionally fooled around, but my first girlfriend I hadn’t spoken to in quite a while, though I’d seen her at the club from time to time, and besides, I never dated anyone long enough to become anything other than friends, and didn’t want to, either. People, once you trusted them? Fucked you over, and I’d been fucked enough, thanks.

Besides, I had too much to do to have time for that sort of stuff.

“She’s an American. From here, I mean, New York, actually,” Blue added.

“Don’t ask me if I know her,” I cautioned her and laughed. “New York’s a very big place.” That was something everyone from everywhere did, and as far as I can tell, still does, you know, the “Hey, I’m from X,” followed by “Oh yeah? I know Y in X—do you know him/her/it?” I think it’s funny and sort of cute, even heartwarming in its own way, how we all want to reach for these connections, bridge the gaps of time and space/place.

“How big is Staten Island?” she asked me with a small twist of her lips and appraisal in her eyes. “Because that’s where she’s from.”

“Not nearly as big,” I said and laughed again. “Sooner or later, you find that everyone is someone’s cousin or sibling or something like that.”

“Well, that explains it then,” Blue smiled, “you must be a cousin.” She put her bottle down beside her.

That was weird, and I gave her a puzzled look. “What do you mean?” As far as I knew, all the cousins I had in this state, and there were only two of them, were in grammar school, and in fact, they lived with their mom in my parents’ house.

“You look so very much like her, and there could hardly be two of you, could there. I mean, she never mentioned a twin of any sort, especially not with the same name.”

My head started to tingle and I could feel the skin on the back of my neck tighten. *This is more than the alcohol, this is a sign, a part of my brain*

said. *Have another drink and don't be a moron*, the other part told me. Since that was the part that I thought made sense, I listened to it and took yet another sip of my this-is-NOT-juice juice.

But...still...

“What’s your friend’s name?” I asked, my curiosity more than piqued. It could be possible, I mean, maybe I did have a cousin I hadn’t known of before. Lord knows, history—hell, the world—is full of stories like that. Some of them even true, or something like that. *Okay, that’s the alcohol thinking for you*, said the part of my brain that had just told me to have some more.

“Oh no, not my Ann, but a girl she once knew a few years back,” Blue corrected. “She has pictures, from secondary—I’m sorry—high school yearbooks, and you look very much like her friend. But,” and as she paused, the expression in her eyes softened, “sadly enough, Annie’s friend passed away quite some time ago and you,” she ran a finger along my cheek, “you’re quite alive.” Blue smiled sensually and showed me her teeth as she gently stroked my chin with her thumb. Her eyes lingered appreciatively on my lips.

My cheeks grew hot as I blushed, but still I considered what she’d said. It was possible she was talking about my high school and year book, I mean, I’d been in pictures all over it for each of the four years I attended, but I didn’t remember anyone named Ann, or not at least that I’d hung out with, and I couldn’t remember anyone that had died, at least not recently.

I mean, there had been one girl who’d been a freshman when I was in my sophomore year, a lovely girl named Susan who’d been born with an incomplete heart wall—a blue baby.

Sadly enough, for whatever reason, that poor heart finally stopped one day, and the entire student body mourned the loss of the beautiful soul that she was and the person she could have become.

But still, even with the sad death of Susan, I couldn’t think of who it could be. Besides, she and I had looked nothing alike, unless you subscribe to the general sentiment that all *Homo Sapiens* look alike. She’d been a light ash-blond to my auburn-infused brunette, and due to her condition, Susan had been very slightly built. On the other hand, while I wasn’t terribly tall, I had definitely been more robust.

Well, I’d *had* to be. I’d been on the swim team, after all.

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It must have been simply that the DJ booth was dark and clearly, Blue and I had both been drinking. Ergo, she must have made a mistake. Just because I didn't know or remember an Ann at school with me didn't mean there wasn't one in some other school. After all, there were at least two other all-girl ones, not to mention the almost dozen other co-ed and public ones, on Staten Island.

"No," I slowly shook my head. "I've never gone to school with an Ann," I told Blue. "Do you know what school she went to?" I asked, thinking that if I didn't know her, there was a good chance that I already knew someone who did.

"Oh no. Annie, Ann," she smiled broadly and reached out to touch my shoulder, "that's her nickname. Her name is really—" but she never got to finish the sentence.

The door to the booth slammed open, and as Trace flounced up the three little steps, the force of her push allowed the door to bounce back shut again. She looked upset.

I jumped off from my seat in alarm and Blue followed suit. I stepped towards Trace. "What's wrong?" I asked with concern as Trace's eyes burned.

Correction: Definitely upset, very upset, and possibly angry.

"What the fuck do you think you're playing at?" she spat out venomously. "Just what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

My concern vanished; I knew what was going to happen. Trace was just about to pull one her famous jealousy scenes. I'd witnessed a few in the past, all them unleashed on her current boy toy, but this time, for whatever her reasons...she'd decided to focus on me.

I quickly checked over my shoulder, ensuring Blue was safely behind me—there was absolutely no need for her to be in the line of fire, after all—stepped closer to Trace.

"My job and *nothing* that you wouldn't do," I ripped back at her, and pointedly studied her a bit.

Who the fuck was she to question me, anyway? She'd set me up in the box with Blue in the first place. Fuck her if I called her bluff, and fuck her and her jealousy. She had no right to it.

"Don't be a fuckin' smartass, Nina," Trace warned. "I mean—" she gestured at Blue, but continued to glare at me "—her."

"I was just showing..." I paused a moment.

Fuck.

My fingers still knew what it felt like to be inside her and I didn't even know her name.

Christ.

In my head, she was Blue, but I was sure she had a name other people used, like the one she'd been born with, perhaps? I glanced at her and luckily for me, she picked up on my thoughts.

"Candace," she whispered to me.

"Thanks," I staged whispered with a quick and what I hope was a reassuring smile before I turned to face Trace again. "I was showing Candace the booth, and letting her pick out a few tracks. She's keeping me company," I added blandly.

Well, what else was I supposed to say?

Blue—I mean Candace—slipped beside me and made her way next to Trace by the steps.

"I can see you and your girlfriend have some things to discuss so I'll just say goodbye now," she said by the top of the steps.

"She's not my girlfriend," I affirmed to Candace.

"I'm not her girlfriend," Trace ground out from the corner of her mouth.

I watched as Candace studied Trace and I realized for the first time that she was more than a bit older than me, maybe mid to late twenties. Not that I cared, that's not a big deal or anything, it's just that I hadn't noticed before.

"No, you're not that," she said with a thoughtful expression as she made her own discovery of Trace, "and not quite a friend either, I see."

Blue, um, Candace took a step back towards me while Trace mulled that over. I tucked that into the back of my head to think about later, because at this moment, I agreed with Candace. I suspected she may have spoken truer than she knew.

Candace leaned towards me. "Watch out, love," she whispered into my ear. "That one has fangs." She kissed my cheek briefly but warmly, and I returned it as we gave each other a quick embrace. She went back down the steps to the door.

"Lovely meeting you," she told Trace politely, here hand on the latch. "Nina?" her voice lifted and she smiled at me.

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“Yes?” I couldn’t help but smile back at her in inquiry—I really liked the sound of her voice.

“You’re simply lovely. I’ll see you soon, love,” and with that, she went down the steps and out the door, closing it behind her.



I downed what little remained of the—not juice I’d already started, then tossed the empty cup into the waste pail. Grabbing the one Andra had fortuitously left for me, I sipped it as I ignored Trace, who simply stood there glaring at me with her arms folded, and went back to my board.

I’d lost all feeling for the night.

No flood, no rush, no buzz—just an emptiness that was heavier under my skin than the restlessness from before.

But it didn’t matter whether or not if I’d lost the feeling, I still had a job to do. Plenty of people out there and counting on me to provide their good time, and I was going to do that.

Donning my headphones once more, I checked the meter and set my fades, timing for the next cue, sliding it into the mix. Scratch what I said before.

I wasn’t numb, I was drained.

I could never figure her out—Trace, I mean. She was ready to fuckin’ chew me a new asshole, and I didn’t even really know why.

She’d sent Candace to the booth in the first place, what in the world was she so mad about?

I finished my drink and looked back up and over the dance floor. I spotted Andra and when she finally saw me, I signaled for another round. She nodded and disappeared.

Funny, I mused as I pushed the headset off my ears and around my neck, then looked blindly through the discs I’d pulled out earlier to lay them out in their upcoming order, *once you pass the second or third sip, you really don’t taste the alcohol anymore.*

A gentle hand touched the bare skin of my back and I stiffened slightly. “I’m sorry, Nina,” Trace whispered into my hair and kissed the soft skin behind my ear.

I worked on in silence as she etched light patterns onto my skin. That...was just typical Trace.

In like a flash flood, out like a gentle spring rain. Okay, more like a hormonal spring flood. But me, well, she just left me confused at best.

If I was angry, I couldn't stay that way, and if I was happy, I couldn't stay that way. No matter what I did, it wasn't the right thing to do, and whatever I was, it apparently wasn't the right thing to be.

And now she was sorry.

What an ugly joke—I should have just kicked her out of the booth—but her apology softened my anger and she began massaging my neck and shoulders, adding light, sensual kisses to the back of my neck between pressure points.

This proves one thing, I told myself. It proves I am a complete idiot.

As I added the finishing touches to the mix, affection for Trace rose and blended with the frustration, and the sensual stirring that Trace created wherever she went.

I let myself lean back into her a moment, then caught myself and stopped. Trace wrapped an arm across my shoulders and one around my waist, anchoring a hand on my hip.

“Come on, Nina, you know how I am,” she cajoled softly, following it up with little kisses.

“Yeah,” I answered shortly.

Andra had already come back and dropped off another beverage without a word. I grabbed the new one and downed it.

Trace was driving me crazy, and she knew it. She was manipulating me, and I knew it. I didn't respect myself for responding, even if I didn't let on how effective she was. In fact, I was angry: with Trace for trying to play me, and with myself for being so damn easy to play.

I found more knobs on the board to adjust.

Trace pulled me tightly into her arms. “Nina, you know how I feel about you,” her voice persuaded in her honeyed-whiskey tones and she let the very tip of her tongue played across that sensitive spot right behind and under my ear.

I set my mix and with a shrug of the shoulder, I turned within that tight embrace so we were face to face. I looked up at her, and caught her eyes with mine.

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What the hell was that supposed to mean? What the fuck was she trying to say? Why didn't anyone ever just come right out and say what they meant?

Also, what had she done to Van? Was he sitting, brain melted and blood drained, in a corner somewhere? She done with him, too?

My skin felt like it was on fire and my throat burned. The constant sexual tension and half toned seduction, the all too confusing words—I couldn't, I just *couldn't* any more—my chest felt like it would explode with pressure.

“No, Trace—I don't,” the words tore from my lips, harsh and jagged, “because you've never told me.” I looked up into her eyes and even in this dim light, they flashed silver. “You...” I started softly as I reached for her face “...play games.”

Before I fully realized what I was about to do, I kissed her, hard and full, on those baby soft lips that answered mine with a surprisingly slick sensuality.

A moment passed, then another. Putting my hands on her shoulders I pushed her away, breaking the contact.

Trace stared at me, her expression undefinable and unknowable.

“You kiss me, you pet me, then you go fuck whoever and when they lie, when they hurt you, *I'm* the one...” I placed my hand over my chest, heat running so high within me I could feel my ears burn. “Me, *I'm* the one to heal you and hold you through it, until you feel better, until it's time for the *next* one.”

Trace waved a hand in confusion and reached for my shoulder. “Nina, I—”

“No, Trace,” I brushed her hand away in impatient frustration. “You tell me we're friends, that what we are together is beautiful.”

I raised my fingertips to her cheek, and traced it lightly. My thumb brushed gently against her lips. “Oh Trace, ” I sighed as she kissed my thumb softly. “I'd fuckin' die for you if it would make you happy, but I think you'd just laugh.”

I watched her face for a reaction, any reaction, as I tried to control the short, hard bursts that forced themselves through my throat and passed for breath.

A part of my mind—probably the part that had called me a moron—marveled inwardly. I'd never spoken to anyone and especially not Trace, like this before. I was always the understanding friend, the supportive, comforting presence. In the past, I had been hurt, I had been confused, but never before had I been furious and let it show. I might not have understood it, but I was definitely just going with it. Well hell, I'd already been doing that all night.

With surprising speed and motion, Trace grabbed my wrists and held them to my side, then, using the height she had on me to her advantage, she backed me into the board, pinning me with her hips. My back thudded against the ledge, though I barely felt it.

This time, the sound *did* skip.

My headphones slid off my neck and down my back. They landed with a felt smack onto the board.

"Nina, that's not true, you *know* how I feel—" she leaned her forehead against mine—"about you."

I swore I could hear the beginning of a laugh bubbling in the back of her voice.

Alarmed by her speed, by her force, by the position I was in, I tried to free myself from her grip to at least rescue my headphones, but I could barely move my arms.

Man, what the hell's wrong with me? I asked myself in a near-panic. I couldn't move, and believe me, I tried. My muscles just wouldn't obey the commands my brain was sending.

God, I was drunker than I thought, and I was *scared*, scared because I couldn't move, and *really* scared for the first time, of Trace, the intensity of her words, and the raw power of her body against mine.

I'd forgotten, or maybe just ignored, how for all her delicate looks, Trace was also incredibly strong. And it had never occurred to me, for even a single second, that things could or would *ever* go in this kind of physical direction.

"What do you want from me?" she hissed into my ear, then scraped along its edge with her teeth.

With a quick twist of her hips, Trace pressed between my thighs and with a strong sweep, she spread my legs so wide I would have fallen over, if she hadn't had me pinned to the board. How the hell did she *do* that?

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Her arms pressed mine even more firmly than before, locked down by my hips and yet she was still able to reach all the way around and grab my ass, the very tips of her fingers on my inner thighs, up against the sides of my pussy.

Whatever this was, wherever this was going, I didn't like it, and I wanted it to end. "Trace, stop!" I ordered with as much strength as I could muster.

Wherever this was going, I didn't want it between us.

Heartbreakingly beautiful, Trace was a striking combination of slender lines and strength, a vulnerable fortress.

How many nights since I'd moved into the building that we shared had we spent together, in her apartment or mine, my arms around her while she cried, because of old wounds that still ached, new ones that still bled, or just because there were things in the world that simply touched her that deeply?

How many mornings had she woken me with kisses and caresses, made me breakfast and made sure I took my vitamins? And then there was time we spent together, just cuddled up, talking of nothing, everything, listening to music, just wrapped up against each other, listening to one another breathe...

But in all that time and all that closeness, even with all the flirting and sleeping skin to skin, we had never, and I mean *never*, gone to that next step.

Slept together, yes, but it was *sleep*, and not sex. Hell, this was the first time we'd ever really kissed, I mean, without an audience that is.

I'd never wanted to push for anything, I'd just wanted to let them go the way they naturally would, whatever that was.

But maybe Trace was tired of waiting, because she ignored my request. "You want me to tell you how I love you, that I honestly want you..." Her lips slid along the sensitive column of my neck. Teeth replaced her lips with such strength that I knew she'd drawn blood. But then, when didn't she, one way or another?

"You want me to tell you how I feel...how *you* make me feel..." Her hands, her fingers, they held and pushed so hard into my skin, pressed into the muscle.

"Because you hold me and...Nina...I feel peaceful, and my dreams are filled with *you*, you holding me, me loving you..." and she slid a fingertip

along the slight depression that marked my lips "...and if I let you, your love makes me feel whole." She pressed harder, massaging me with her finger tips through my stockings.

"Trace, you don't want to do this," I said as steadily as I could.

My heart pounded, my head swam, and the skin along my arms felt tight, cold, numb, grabbed and slammed down in the vice that was Trace. I couldn't explain then how I felt, but I can say it now:

I loved her.

I pitied her.

I wanted her...wanted to help, to hold, to *heal* her, somehow.

She scared the *shit* out of me.

I was caught between horror and desire. Yes, I wanted her, but I wanted something between us to be real, not real scary. This just felt so wrong, so very wrong. *I hope I wake up soon. Real soon, I wished.*

"But I do," she answered, ripping at my lower lip with her teeth.

I could feel her fumbling for the seam, and I felt her fingers gain purchase and pull, her hands hard against me.

"You want me to..." she whispered into my ear.

Jesus Christ, she wasn't going to *stop*.

Her mouth continued working on my neck, weaving exquisite patterns on my throat while her fingertips continued to trace my outlines. I could feel the groan that she tasted as her lips nipped a particularly sensitive spot and as I arched my neck and offered her my throat, I began to think, *okay, maybe she needs this to be able to let go to just be...be real. If I surrender—completely—then maybe, so can she.*

The part of my mind that wasn't drunk surged forward. *What am I, fucking crazy? More likely—she'll suck my soul dry.*

Summoning strength from I don't know where, maybe it was just that Trace's grip slipped, or that my brain and spine had decided to communicate with each other again, together my brain, spine, and I remembered an old move from the judo I had been forced to study in high school. My legs set as they were, I couldn't move up, so I managed to bend my knees a bit and slid down. Rotating my arms outwards and applying pressure from my elbows to hers, I was able to break her hold and bring my arms up, while removing Trace's hands from my body.

Emphasis on *mine*.

PUNK AND ZEN

Don't get me wrong, I'd been aroused earlier, and this situation wasn't doing anything to lessen that, but it was my body that responded, not my mind, not my heart. I didn't want this, not this way, and I discovered something: there was a limit to just how much I could give.

Nightmare over.

I was wide awake now.

"Goddammit, Trace," I spat out as I wiggled free, "fuckin' enough. Just stop." I pushed up against her chest and she fell back a step.

But still, her words were spinning through my head, confusing me, twisting me. I managed to bring my legs together and stand somewhat upright.

My chest felt like it had two jack hammers playing off-rhythm to one another and my head was starting to feel like someone had sped the merry-go-round up a bit too fast, but still, through the hammering and the dizziness, all I could think was, *she's right, though—that's what I want. Everything.*

My eyes burned as I turned back to my board. Where were my fucking headphones? Oh, there. I grabbed them and set them firmly around my neck.

I ignored Trace completely as I reoriented myself to the board and my world, and a drop of water fell onto the soundboard. What the fuck?

Oh, it was me. I hate tears, especially mine. What the fuck was I crying for, anyway? The leak stopped.

I could feel Trace as she approached my back. Her hand was gentle again as she touched my shoulder. I reached for the microphone.

"Nina, I'm sorry," she began softly, her mouth inches from my ear, but I held up a hand forestall her.

I needed quiet at the moment. I was, after all, still on the job. I watched my fingers tremble, betraying how the body and mind felt as I took a deep, shaky breath, and keyed the microphone.

"Boyz and grrlz, the freaks are out tonight." My voice came out steadily and with the right tone as the audience clapped and howled in agreement. I waited a few beats for my next statement. "Tonight the moon is on the rise...better watch out 'cuz no one knows in who a monster hides," I finished, bringing the mix back up on full.

I shut the mic and squared my shoulders and set my face. A burning cold hardness that I had felt only once before, once when I'd had to defend myself from the people who were supposed to love me, filled me, and I turned around to look at Trace directly. There must have really been something in my face, because as her eyes met mine, she stepped back.

We watched each other a moment, her eyes confused, evaluating, mine hard. She reached out for my face. "Nina, truly, I didn't mean..."

I'd had it for the night, maybe forever, who knew. But either way, my expression stopped her cold, mid-word and mid-motion. I stared at her hand, suspended between us until she dropped it.

I crossed my arms over my chest and settled back against the board, languidly stretching one leg over the other. My guts shook, my head hurt, and the spot I was leaning on ached in the way only an incipient bruise can, but I'd be damned, twice damned, if I let her see any of that. I was back in some semblance of control, and real or no, mask or no, I was going to hold on to it for dear life if I had to.

And with Trace, I had the deep certainty that I had to.

I took a slow, deep breath and let it out silently. *Focus*, I reminded myself as I breathed. Center, and focus. That's what I needed, and that's what I was after. "Trace?" I inquired quietly, arching an eyebrow at her.

An eerie, hyper-real calmness filled me, and I was as steady and strong as a rock.

"Yeah?" she answered softly, her eyes wide, shocked, as she studied me.

"If you want something, you have to ask," I stated quietly, letting my words hang in the air.

I observed her face, took in the gentle quirk of her lips and sharp jaw line, the hint of pain and confusion in her now-darkened eyes as they studied me in return.

Trace took a step closer to me. "I'm sorry, I don't know what—"

"Stop," I interrupted. my voice was low and hard. "Trace?" I asked again softly.

She nodded at me.

"Get out."

Unused to these tones from me, Trace was bewildered. She held her hands slightly away from her body, as if she didn't know what to do with them and she stared at me, more in shock I suspect, than anything else.

PUNK AND ZEN

No one, as far as I'd ever known, had ever told Trace what to do—ever. “Now,” I interrupted, unfolding an arm and pointing towards the door.

It became a contest of wills as we stared each other down. My gaze was steady and unflinching, and my hand never moved from the direction it pointed in.

Trace's expression changed from shock to sadness as she dropped her eyes from mine, and her heels scuffed along the carpet as she walked to the steps, gazing floorward. I re-crossed my arms, just watching her. As she reached for the door, she looked back up at me.

She both sad and frightened. “We need to,” she began. “I mean, I want...” she trailed off, gazing at me with an uncharacteristic uncertainty.

By now though, I had no patience left. This had to end before I softened again, gave in and just let her kidnap my soul. “We'll talk,” I promised, knowing full well what she wanted.

But at the moment, all I wanted to be was alone. I was angry with Trace, yes, but much more than that, I was furious—disgusted—with myself, with what she'd forced me to see.

Trace searched my face a moment, then finally nodded and stepped out, closing the door behind her. I stared at the closed door, as if almost expecting yet another person to burst in.

Finally, I stood up straight.

I stretched my back a bit.

It hurt.

Ah well, I thought cynically, another day, another bruise. Besides, there'll be plenty of time for self-loathing and analyzing later. I still have to get through the night.

I took my headphones off and walked down the little steps to the door. This time I locked it.

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PUNK AND ZEN
PART 1
THE REMIX

BY JD GLASS

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