

By
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Chapter One

Alex stretched her cramped muscles over the firm cushion of her airline seat. She usually enjoyed traveling but she still had five hours of this trip to kill and it was hard for her not to feel grouchy. She opened her eyes to the dimly lit cabin of the transatlantic flight. In front of her one of the *Star Wars* epics ran silently through its motions. The sporadic sounds of restless passengers drifted through her ears: a baby crying, someone coughing, the excited chattering of a young G.I., two children giggling, and an even fainter snoring from somewhere behind her.

There was an eerie quality to the broken silence of the semi dark surroundings. The plane was filled with passengers, many of whom were soldiers and airmen, and the families of service members relocating overseas. Alex was one of them. After eight long months of waiting for government housing, her husband had finally been assigned housing so she could join him in Germany. This was the longest military separation that she and Sonny had ever endured and until last night Alex had been longing for this reunion. Now she could only dread it.

She exhaled a weary sigh as her attention returned to the silent picture screen before her. She had never been enthralled with science fiction so she didn't bother listening to the soundtrack being piped through the headphones she'd abandoned in her lap. Instead she adjusted the little airline pillow she had scrunched up at her shoulder and shut her eyes. She desperately needed to sleep but she knew that was impossible. Nonetheless, she stretched into the kink in her back in an effort to release it, then she unwillingly closed her eyes to await the private horror show that had been playing in a constant repeat inside her head since she boarded the plane.

Jeff.

Like a record on a turntable stuck in a scratch, her mind couldn't leave his haunting image behind.

"Where's your bad ass cop husband now, Alex?"

The arrogant expression staring out from his familiar face and his mean-spirited taunts were unfamiliar to Alex. Jeff was Sonny's oldest and dearest friend. The two men thought of themselves as brothers.

That's why Sonny trusted him.

Alex's rambling mind spun through the unwanted playback of last night as she attempted to fall asleep on her disjointed *dooms-day* flight to Europe. It was crazy how the sequence of events wasn't lucid in her head. It was all out of order like a scrambled Rubik's cube; the happy talk between Jeff and her over cooked dinner at his place shattered by the intermittent images of Jeff's inebriated rants that followed their dinner conversation and his subsequent...

Alex shuddered at the memory. Her husband had encouraged their dinner date. Alex could still hear the words of his long-distance phone call. *"Why not pop in on him for dinner since you have the overnight layover in his town? He's a familiar face in an unfamiliar place, and I'll feel good knowing you're safe with him."*

But this wasn't the same Jeff that the two of them had known since childhood because the man they both knew was a changed person.

"It's just a kiss between friends. Nothing we haven't done before."

Alex wished she could silence the noise of Jeff inside her head, but his words kept taunting her and so did the accompanying visuals of him crushing her body.

"Sonny won't care."

Of course, he would care, but Jeff was good at manipulating fact into fiction, or at least misconstruing fiction for fact.

Alex and Jeff *had* kissed before; in fact, they had gone a little further than that when Alex and Jeff dated in high school before Jeff introduced Alex to Sonny. But their innocent past no longer made sense as it tumbled out of place into the horrible new reality of last night.

"Get away from me."

Alex knew she had commanded that; she could clearly remember saying those precise words, but Jeff had refused her pleas as if her resistance was just an act.

"And she's feisty, too."

His self-serving observation was followed by a mocking chuckle that was more hateful than joyful. *"Is this how you play with Sonny? Maybe he handcuffs you?"*

Alex realized her mistake was in not leaving sooner, but the last thing she had expected was for Jeff to do this to her. *They were friends.* They were once high school sweethearts. That was the singular thought that kept running through her head last night. Jeff wouldn't do this to her.

"I know you want this..." Jeff's words couldn't hide the contradiction of her resistance though he seemed to believe his alternative scenario. *"And you won't tell Sonny,"* he cautioned her with a sneer as he manipulated the facts. *"Because Sonny knows our dating history."*

It was blackmail meant to intimidate her into keeping his secret. Alex recognized that at the time and she restlessly shivered now in her uncomfortable seat as wondered how her forced secret would work for all of them in the end. Jeff knew her so well – about as well as he knew Sonny.

His taunting voice continued in her head. *"You really think Sonny's been monogamous all these years?"* It was where the scene started on the Rubrik's cube as it flipped inside her skull. *"Especially the last eight months?"* The verbal attacks Jeff made on Sonny's character were calculated attempts to destroy Alex's confidence in him. Of course, she believed that her husband was faithful; but after an eight-month separation, who wouldn't be susceptible to some carefully planted doubts?

Jeff sowed his seeds with precision. *"He's romanced a lady before, Alex. Ladies you don't even know about. And he knows how a little wine and dine can trigger the right motion. He's got his moves down to an art. Watch him next time he's on a roll."*

Alex silently reassured herself against the rambling inside her head but the disconcerting noise mercilessly continued.

"As soon as he picks you up from the airport, he'll start the chase. Maybe a cozy little dinner for two with candles flickering in your radiant, love sick faces." It was mean character slander coming from someone who should've been more loyal to Sonny.

"You make him sound so manipulative, Jeff." Alex heard herself defend him. *"But that's not how Sonny operates."*

Jeff's laugh in response to her defense of Sonny was vindictive and confident. *"And I suppose he wasn't getting serviced by Christine when you wouldn't give it up in high school?"*

It was a deliberate stab at an old worn out wound. Sonny lost his virginity to the older Christine. And it wasn't a secret that the two of them enjoyed a hot and steady relationship before Sonny started dating Alex?

"When?" Alex hated herself for letting Jeff get to her, but in his taunting presence, her faith in Sonny faltered.

His smile became self-assured as he noticed her own confidence wilting. But the doubt Jeff was creating went in direct contrast with Sonny's impeccable character. Alex reminded herself of that fact as the strobe light of bad visions changed before her. The storyline was all out of focus –

the snatches of conversation unfolding in her head – the snippets of unwanted recordings she couldn't escape.

It had started so subtly; an innocent laugh over dinner as the two of them reminisced about their high school days; then a pat on the knee as they chatted on the couch, a joke between old friends, then tears as Jeff told her that his girlfriend of five years had left him. It wasn't until he dropped a hand on Alex's thigh that she suddenly became worried about his intentions. It was the first time she left the couch and asked him to take her to her hotel.

It was strange the way the picture was evolving in her head, already out of context, weaving out of control through her troubled brain. They *did* have some wine with dinner. Alex clearly remember drinking one glass of red wine – but only one glass. She was confident that she wasn't drunk. But maybe Jeff got drunk? She remembered him offering her more – but she declined the offer – and then he refilled his own glass. Once? Maybe twice? Or was it more than that? She remembered him bringing his bottle to the coffee table when they sat on the couch to chat. *He must've gotten drunk.* What else could've triggered the change in his mood?

"Nobody can go eight long months without getting laid, Alex. Not Sonny and not even you." That's what Jeff claimed after the fact to try and convince Alex that she'd asked for it – that she'd been a willing participant. *"Especially when you're drunk... and you are drunk."* He kept drumming that into her head during her stunned silence that followed his horrible actions. *"We both are. And if you tell Sonny about this, it'll be the first thing he asks you."*

Jeff mockingly ran her through Sonny's query. *"How much wine did you drink? Were you horny? Did you come onto him, Alex?"* His voice became hateful, *"The cool suave cop. He'll rip you to pieces with his cynical interrogation. And then... bye-bye Sonny and happily ever after..."*

His description of Sonny as a cynical cop was right on the money. Sonny's biggest flaw was his vocational cynicism. And in five short hours Alex would be in his cool suave arms as cynical as they might be. Until last night the thought had filled Alex with anticipation. Today she was filled with terror about their inevitable reunion. Everything that she and Sonny held dear was now vulnerable in Alex's precarious hands.

The slow-motion replay became a more lucid playback as Alex remembered her struggle with Jeff. At some point, her lip was bitten, but she couldn't remember if it was Jeff who bit it in his effort to have her, or Alex who bit it in her effort to get away from him.

"It's Sonny's turn for sloppy seconds." Alex remembered Jeff saying that. *"And next time Sonny has you, I'll be right here in your head..."* He tapped his finger into her forehead to drill his point home for her. *"Sharing the moment with you..."*

"Stop it!" Alex jerked awake from the sound of her own voice.

For a moment, she felt naked and exposed to the world, but a quick check with her hand assured her that she was still clothed. Her focus expanded to the silent cabin of mostly sleeping passengers until her eyes landed on the elderly GI who was sitting beside her.

"I ahm..." She grimaced with an embarrassed shrug and looked away from him. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd betrayed her tortured thoughts to him.

Sonny... Her eyes went to her watch. Her tormented slumber had managed to kill forty-five minutes of this endless ride to freedom. Alex rubbed the spot on her forehead without realizing what she was doing, then she shivered with disgust as her actions hit her.

Purgatory – that's where she was now; *sincerely, Jeff.*

With the horror of that apocalyptic thought, Alex shut her eyes again for another unwanted horror show. Maybe she'd fall asleep despite the madness in her mind, despite the sound of Jeff's

watch ticking ninety second minutes by... and the stench of his liquor-soaked breath burping wine inside her mouth as he pawed and thrashed away at her body.

It was a power thing he had done to her to vindicate the wrongs that he perceived committed against him. That was the only sense Alex could make out of his hateful actions – but why her? She had never done anything wrong to him. And why Sonny? They were supposed to be best friends. *They were practically family.*

Alex shuddered with her thoughts as she surrendered once more to the crazed thinking in her head. Jeff would never be out of her mind no matter how hard Alex tried to erase him. Everything had changed for her in that one shocking hour of supposed conversation that became something else. And unbeknownst to Sonny, everything had changed between him and his best friend. Sonny just didn't know that yet. But Jeff understood that. Alex saw that specific realization come to his mind last night in the awkward silence that followed his hurtful actions. It came out in the way that he tried to make amends without admitting anything incriminating.

He avoided making eye contact with her as he apologetically reached over her body to straighten her torn dress in a crude attempt to cover her unwilling nudity. Then he offered a meek apology.

"Wow..." His tone expressed regret as he reached without looking at her for a cigarette butt from an ashtray on the coffee table. "I don't know what just came over me." He straightened the cigarette butt, lit it with trembling hands, and inhaled the tobacco like there was no tomorrow. "Say something, Alex."

But what was there to say? He'd just forced unprotected sex on her and everything dirty that came with it.

Alex closed her eyes and covered her ears in a vain attempt to block Jeff's image out of her rambling, disjointed mind. The airplane was flying through turbulence and she felt like throwing up. In fact, she had a headache that wouldn't quit and a cramp in her shoulder blade that wouldn't leave her alone. *It went with her mood.*

Alex unfastened her seat belt and silently stepped around the snoring GI in the aisle seat, in an effort to get to the bathroom at the back of the plane before she lost the remaining contents of last night's dinner.

Nobody else looked sick.

Alex glanced through the stillness of the cabin. It was as if the entire world had shifted into slow motion without her.

In three more hours, Sonny would stand before her, and in three more hours Alex had to have a clear mind. Jeff was right about that. A secret had moved in between Sonny and her, and it looked like it wanted to stay there forever. She couldn't tell her husband about last night. She still felt so dirty. And that wasn't the reunion that either of them had been envisioning for the last eight months.

Alex shuddered at how ruined she now felt. She wasn't even sure if she was still herself.

She returned from the bathroom a few minutes later and found her seat. The G.I. was now drooling between snores.

Two hours and thirty-five minutes left before her world would be over... Alex plopped into her seat beside her drooling seatmate and shifted into a more relaxed position. Her neck was stiff and her legs were cramped but she bravely shut her eyes for a repeat performance of the silent film being spun inside her head.

Two hours and counting...

It started again. Jeff's leering face, laughing down at her.

Chapter Two

"Hey!"

Alex spun toward the voice that was unmistakably, Sonny's. His military influenced twang continued more noticeably.

"There's my lady!" He stepped closer to the customs gate between them and reached for her bags. "Is this everything?"

Alex stared back at the man before her. He looked like her husband, talked like him too, but she undeniably felt awkward and insecure in his presence.

"This is it." She shot him a forced smile.

"You're traveling light this time, huh?" The warm familiar grin that Sonny returned helped to close the time warp he didn't know she was caught up in.

Alex nodded as she followed him through the crowded gate until they reached a clearing by the wall. Sonny dropped her bags and turned to face her. She assumed he could tell by the look on her scared face that she was hiding something he'd like to know.

"So... let me take a look at you, darlin'."

Alex brought the smile back onto her face as she desperately tried picturing anything but Jeff. How could Sonny possibly miss the evidence that Jeff had left emblazoned on her torso?

Sonny turned her around with an appreciative grin. "The good thing about being a cop is you develop a great mind for detail. You look as good as I remembered." His eyes sparkled brightly with the fire of a thousand brilliant diamonds. "Naw you don't. You look better, Allie."

Alex kept the frozen smile plastered on her face as she silently wondered how the hotshot cop before her could miss so many obvious signs of distress. It was almost disappointing that Sonny didn't notice her turmoil. In fact, it was insulting. What happened to his trained cynicism?

He let out a soft chuckle and teasingly waved a hand in front of her face. "So, did the cat walk away with your tongue, or is your mind still asleep in New York?" He didn't wait for an answer. "You can't imagine how much I've missed you, lady."

"I'm sorry." He was right. She suddenly couldn't. In fact, his good humor felt violating. *Everybody wanted something from her.* Sonny was expecting a kiss.

He pulled her into his body and the gleam in his eyes told her he was ready for that sweet exchange. "Man, I'm all out of breath, darlin'." Sonny rolled his tongue over his mouth in quiet expectation. "I don't know if I should hug you, kiss you, or ask permission first?"

"I know." Alex forced herself to say something. It was crazy, but she hated the thought of Sonny doing either of the romantic gestures he so excitedly suggested. She just didn't feel ready to physically engage with him, but she didn't know how to cover that or dodge his loving assault. "I kind of feel like we're strangers."

"Naw." Sonny dragged her into a reassuring squeeze that threatened to suffocate her as he held her against his body. "We're just a little off balance." He tipped her chin up so his mouth could drop a polite peck on her lips. Then he stepped away from her and scooped up her bags. "Come on. The car's parked outside." Sonny nodded toward the exit. "I was supposed to be in Bamberg this week working a homicide, but I told Cpt. McNally, no way I was gonna send a stranger to pick you up."

He leaned his back into a door and waved Alex through it. "So, how was the flight? Pretty boring?"

Alex nodded at his question. Everything he said sounded like calculated small talk.

Jeff had poisoned her mind.

Sonny's chatter continued, but Alex could pay it no attention. Her mind was fearfully fretting about the secret she was now keeping from him. It wasn't possible to pull the wool over Sonny's eyes without him noticing. He was way too smart – almost too clever for his own good. But how could she tell him what happened? He was so unsuspecting and she knew on so many levels, Sonny would be crushed by the truth.

"I feel like I'm babbling off at the mouth here, darlin'."

"What?" His uncharacteristically humble claim startled Alex out of her private thoughts. It was funny but true – Sonny was chattering her ears off – and that was so unlike him. Her husband wasn't a talker, and he rarely displayed any insecurity; that he was doing so now made Alex relax just a little.

"I'm sorry." She stepped closer to him and looped an arm through one of his. "Keep blabbing. I'm enjoying the conversation."

Sonny chuckled at that. "You *must* be tired. Normally I can't get a word in edgewise. No *Chatty-Kathy* today, huh?"

Alex giggled at his observation. Maybe she *could* settle into this reunion with him. After all, he *was* her husband, she'd always adored him, and nothing had changed that. She just didn't feel like her normal self today. She wasn't even sure if she knew what *normal* was anymore. "So..."

"Yeah..." Sonny nodded at her tepid encouragement and continued with his story as Alex fought to submerge her hidden tension. All she needed was the quiet and comfort of her own familiar bed, a little privacy to sort out her thoughts, and about ten hours of peaceful sleep. *Then* she could get on with her life and leave Jeff behind. The problem was, the minute she crawled into bed Sonny would be sure to climb in beside her. And it wouldn't be to sleep. The image brought a shiver down the center of Alex's back.

She had to get Jeff out of her mind.

Alex dropped hold of Sonny's arm as that singular thought took hold of her.

"So..." Sonny shifted the bags he was carrying for her. "Tell me about your visit with Jeff. He practically begged me to have you drop by."

Alex shuddered at Sonny's timing. "I'll just bet he did." She couldn't stop herself from muttering that as she unconsciously stepped farther away from Sonny.

"What did you say?" Sonny leaned in closer to close the gap between them. "Didn't you have a good visit?" He stepped into an elevator, blocking the door open so Alex could follow him in.

If only she had the courage to tell Sonny the truth. Alex desperately wanted to tell him. But how?

"It was okay." Alex had never lied to Sonny and doing so now made her look away with guilt.

Sonny set her suitcases down and pushed an elevator button. Then he faced Alex with a curious gaze as he leaned into the wall to visibly study her. "You got something on your mind about Jeff that I oughta know about?" His eyes locked on hers with new found interest.

Alex looked away. She couldn't help but feel ashamed about what happened though common sense told her it wasn't her fault.

"Darlin'?" Sonny pulled a pack of Marlboros out of his pocket but he didn't light one. He fidgeted with them with an obvious longing, then he put them away to return his undivided attention to Alex. His eyes held her captured in a silent, inquisitive stare down.

Alex pulled out of his gaze to stare instead at the elevator buttons. Sonny had just given her the perfect opportunity to talk and she knew that she should, but she couldn't find the courage to

spit out any words. She didn't want Sonny to know how tarnished she'd become. Everything would change between them even if Sonny assured her that it wouldn't. Even if he didn't *want* it to change. She would always be blemished from this point forward – like soiled goods. Jeff had turned her into garbage – *his garbage*.

"You know Jeff..." Alex tried to sound disinterested to keep Sonny from getting suspicious. Sonny didn't say anything.

Alex held his focus in a silent effort to convince him. She could tell by his contemplative stare that the detective wheels inside him were suddenly turning. "You've said so yourself, Sonny." She added to her uninterested claim to try and bolster her cause. "Sometimes it's even hard for you to beam him in."

Sonny stewed on her observation for another unconvinced minute. "That's all?"

Alex nodded and quickly moved the conversation on before Sonny could question her further. "He and Angela broke up."

"No kidding?" The elevator door opened and Sonny led the way outside. "He didn't tell me about that. Damn, that's too bad. I liked her. The first girlfriend he's ever had that I liked... besides you." He chuckled with what he said.

It was just the distraction Alex wanted. Sonny stopped at a machine to validate their parking ticket, then he glanced over his shoulder and nodded for her to follow him.

"There's snow on the road so it'll slow us down a bit, but we should be home in about three hours." He shrugged with less certainty, and recalculated his time estimate. "Maybe a little longer." He stopped when he reached the back of their black velveteen mustang and dropped her bags onto the ground.

Alex shot him a smile. "That's okay." It wasn't really. The thought of spending three more hours in a cramped seat as he navigated the slick ride home made Alex want to scream. But at least it would give her time to prepare herself mentally for what Sonny would want to do with her when he finally got her home.

Sonny's impish grin confirmed what she was thinking. "I sure have missed you, lady."

"Me too, Sonny." Alex said what he wanted to hear though it shocked her how empty the words felt to her now. *But it was true*. She *had* missed him. But her feelings were more complicated now because her world was unexpectedly changed last night.

"Well, come here then, darlin'." Sonny leaned into the back of their car and pulled her closer. "Let me give you a *real* kiss." His arms squeezed around her body forcing Alex to step into him, and without saying more his lips touched down on hers with sweet emotion.

"I think I've forgotten how to do this." Sonny chuckled at his teasing suggestion and effectively proved otherwise as his kiss became more impassioned. Alex wasn't into it, but Sonny was. The heart beat in his chest began thumping harder and down lower Alex could tell that his body was waking. Sonny tried covering the obvious from her as he shifted slightly away from her, but Alex wasn't fooled. She had never felt more turned off by him.

The kiss came to an end and Sonny gave her a humble smile. "I think I'm remembering..." His face lingered close to hers as he stared longingly into her eyes, then he gave into an impulsive urge to devour her mouth again. Alex tried following his lead but it was a hard act to follow. She just couldn't shake Jeff enough to let Sonny in.

"Damn..." Sonny was unmistakably aroused. He settled himself against the car away from Alex's body. "My lips are going numb," his chuckle was embarrassed. "If I can only get the rest of me to tone it down some."

Alex forced a smile as Sonny dragged her back into another steamy embrace. His lips nibbled hers, his tongue slipped into her mouth and his palms moved more freely down the length of her spine and slowly back up her body with an obvious desire. Then he noticed her lack of enthusiasm and abruptly stopped kissing her.

"I can't turn it down; you can't turn it up." His eyes drank her in with a hurt look.

Alex silently shrugged back at him. How could she explain that?

"Great." Sonny moved his eyes off of her muddled expression to silently gaze into space with disappointment.

"I'm sorry." Alex turned away from him. "It's not you."

The confusion she saw taking over the sensitive green eyes that Sonny returned her direction made Alex hate herself for not telling him.

"I've just got this incredible headache and it's making me feel cranky... plus, I'm feeling moody. It was a long trip by myself and I'm tired. I can never get comfortable on a long plane ride. And I feel weird not having seen you for nearly a year, you know... military reunions after spouses have been deployed, they're always so awkward... and we're standing here in a parking garage in this foreign country – so that's a little different, and..."

"Don't darlin'." Sonny stopped her from going on. "Stacked up excuses in a pile that high is always a bad sign of a desperate cover for something bigger than what's being admitted."

"Oh." Alex lost her composure for a fleeting second. "It's not that, I'm just, it's not... I'm sorry." She stopped herself from adding to her towering stack of excuses.

Sonny nodded at her mistake. "You'd tell me if something was bothering you, right?"

Alex avoided his eyes. "I always have before, Sonny."

"That's not what I asked, darlin'." He stepped away from the car and guided Alex toward the passenger door that he politely held open for her. "Hop in."

They were off to a bad start. Sonny shut the door behind her and walked around to the other side of the car. Alex let her eyes follow his movements.

He was so attractive. There was an adorable sultriness about him that helped to mask the cockiness that seeped through his seams. He was untouchably arrogant at times and horribly judgmental, but beneath the macho cover and vocational cynicism was a refreshing vulnerability that he had already unveiled today.

Sonny climbed in beside her with a quiet sigh. "Listen darlin', all you gotta do is tell me to slow down. We don't have to rush anything here." He started the car and backed out of the narrow parking space of the airport garage.

Alex smiled with relief. Jeff was wrong about her husband. There was nothing devious or calculated about him when it came to his heart.

Sonny steered down the winding descent of the parking exit until they were on the street level below and all of a sudden Alex was transported into a foreign country – a land where Mercedes and BMWs far outnumbered Fords and Chevys. Where highways were called, autobahns, and an on-ramp was an Einfahrt instead of a freeway entrance.

Sonny cleared his throat, breaking the tense silence between them. Alex turned his direction. His dusty blonde almost shoulder length hair was about as long now as it was in high school. It definitely didn't look like a military haircut. But that was one of the benefits of working undercover. As long as he looked main stream he could get away with pushing the limits. Alex ran her fingers through it then she reached for his hand.

Sonny glanced her way.

He had the carefully chiseled profile of a Greek God except for his teardrop eyes that were buried beneath hooded lids and thick dark brows that softened his sculpted image. Alex moved her focus down the length of his body. It was possible he'd gained some weight since the last time she'd seen him. Not to the point of being overweight, but he looked more solid than she remembered. Or maybe he just looked cuddly to her.

"You bit your lip."

"What?" Alex was startled by his observation. For a moment she had completely forgotten about Jeff. She felt where her lip was bitten and wondered what she should say about it.

"What happened?" Sonny reached for her hand to remove her finger from the sore. "Looks like it hurt?"

"It did." Alex stared out her window at the snow-covered land around her. It looked bleak and cold like she was suddenly feeling. "I ah..." She faced her husband and saw to her relief that Sonny was concentrating on the slick road, not her. "Ahm..." Alex came up with an explanation. "I slipped on ice back home." She should've been better prepared for his inevitable questions.

Sonny turned a concerned stare on her. "You didn't get hurt anywhere else did you?"

"No." She was lying again.

"Good." Sonny hit a patch of ice that made him swerve and correct himself. "Damn!" He usually kept better control of the car. "I'm distracted by your presence." His twinkling eyes stole a loving glance at her as he slowed his driving down. "You hungry?"

"I don't know." Alex hadn't thought about it. "Are you?"

Sonny nodded as he made the decision to exit the autobahn to head toward a small restaurant that Alex could see alongside the road. "I'm starving." He shot her a happy smile. "A little wine and dine..."

Alex shivered. Sonny was doing exactly what Jeff predicted.

He parked the car and climbed out of it to step around to her side to open the door for her. "Let's get reacquainted, lady." He reached for her hand and pulled Alex to her feet. "Look out darlin', it's icy here too and you're not taking a fall while I'm around to protect you."

Alex forgot about Jeff. She couldn't help but be charmed by the man in her presence. Sonny led the way inside and a waitress escorted the two of them to a table by a large window overlooking a snow-covered hill outside. A small group of children were sliding on wooden sleds. Sonny pulled a chair out for Alex.

"Thanks." It all felt so formal to her. "You're still the gentleman I remember." She shot him a smile.

Sonny returned a happy grin. "You gotta treat 'em classy to keep 'em classy." He sat across from her and reached for an ashtray. "So, fill me in on my pal. What happened between Angie and him?"

Alex lost the good feeling. She didn't want to talk about Jeff. "First you have to tell me about our new home."

Sonny didn't seem to care what they talked about. He ordered their meal in German, then he happily gave Alex a detailed description of the apartment they were about to move into.

"The guy upstairs is a real weasel. Eight out of fourteen nights I've stayed there, he's fought with his old lady."

"You could hear them in our apartment?"

"It was either that or some real sadistic sex." The waitress arrived with a bottle of wine and Sonny stopped his story long enough to taste it, before pouring some in each of their glasses. "A little wine to calm the nerves..."

Alex forced herself not to think about Jeff. "Why would you be nervous?" She knew what was making her anxious; but, Sonny? He never got nervous about anything.

He sipped his wine with obvious amusement. "I *do* wanna impress you, so of course, I'm nervous."

Alex laughed at his confession. "You don't need to impress me. I already love you."

"You do?" Sonny feigned surprise. "You coulda fooled me about that today!"

"Ahh..." Alex returned his tease. "I hurt the man's feelings." She gave him a comforting pat on the arm. "The poor baby."

Sonny liked that he could hide behind the joke they were sharing. "So, next time I show my feathers you'd better stroke 'em, darlin'."

"Yes, sir!" Alex relaxed with a smile. Nothing about Sonny was ever manipulative or pretentious. No matter what he said, whether it came out of anger or happiness, it was never put on. It came from the heart whether he wanted it to or not. Sonny was special like that.

Sincerity; it was one of his finer traits.

When they finished their meal, the flurry of white snowflakes was falling much thicker. Sonny latched onto Alex's arm with a firm protective grip and carefully guided her back to their car, and with her stomach full, and her mind slightly more at ease, the drive home lulled Alex into a deep sleep.