

Tumbling Down

Alix had brought work home. She'd been staring at the screen of her notebook computer for an hour. Nothing. No inspiration. That she had to create romantic images for a line of love notes seemed like a cruel joke. The cursor on her Mac seemed to mock her. Maybe if she stretched her legs. So Alix got up to walk around the living room. She stopped in front of an art deco mirror that hung on the wall and stared at it.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the biggest chump of all? Don't say it," Alix snapped at her reflection.

"What are you doing?" Robyn peered over her shoulder.

"Oh just having a little insanity break. Nothing to worry about." Alix pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes for a second. When she took them down, she lifted her chin and faced Robyn. "I'm fine."

Robyn grasped her shoulders and turned her back to the mirror. "You've been in a daze for the last week. Look at those bloodshot eyes. No sleep."

"I'm sleeping very well, thank you." Alix pushed Robyn's hands away and went back to the sofa.

"Really? Then your sleepless twin is sneaking in here at night to pace the floor," Robyn retorted.

"One night, that's all. And I was thinking about a new line of friendship cards." Alix avoided looking at Robyn.

"Yeah, right. Call him. You'll feel so much better." Robyn grabbed her cell phone and held it out.

Alix recoiled as if it were a snake. "I will not!"

"Yes you will," Robyn insisted. "I'm tired of living with a whacked out, love sick roommate."

"I'm not love sick!" Alix shot from the sofa and jammed both hands on her hips. "Marc and I clicked but it wore off. End of story."

"Oh yeah?" Robyn tilted her head to one side.

"Yeah," Alix shot back. She stared at her hard.

"Okay," Robyn said with a shrug.

"Okay," Alix repeated and sat down again.

Robyn hummed to herself as she went into the kitchen. She came back with a diet cola. Alix pretended to be engrossed in what was on the notebook's monitor. Robyn sat at the other end of the sofa and picked up a magazine. The only sound for several minutes was the snick-snick of Alix's computer keyboard as she worked. Robyn cleared her throat.

"So, I guess you don't care if say he dates some tall lingerie model," she said casually without looking at Alix.

A sick feeling clutched at Alix's stomach. "N-no. I mean, he's a free man and so am I."

"You're a free man?" Robyn pursed her lips.

"Very funny. You know what I mean." Alix glared at her.

"Right, right." More pages of the magazine rustled as Robyn turned them.

Alix stewed for a time until the pressure got to her. "You, uh, mentioned a lingerie model."

"Ummm." Robyn flipped another page and said nothing more.

"Not that it matters. In fact I might go out with that accountant. He's a nice guy," Alix said in a defensive tone when Robyn gave her a look.

"If that's your taste these days." Robyn rolled her eyes before going back to her magazine.

"I mean Marc probably can't turn around for tripping over some gorgeous model. It's his business."

"Maybe that's what it was, business" Robyn said in a vague tone.

"Did you see Marc with another woman?" Alix clamped her lips together too late. The words had slipped past her barricade.

"You set him free to date remember?" Robyn looked at her pointedly.

She felt a painful thud in her chest. "Right."

Robyn went back to the story she was reading. Alix tried to concentrate on dragging a set of images in an arrangement. She stared at the screen until the clip art grew blurry. All she could see was a picture of Marc giving that smile to someone else.

"So, who was she?"

Robyn did not look at her. She flipped another page. "Who?"

"The model, damn it!" Alix pushed the notebook aside.

"All those tall, beautiful sex symbols look alike to me." Robyn lifted a shoulder.

Alix twisted her hands together. Unable to sit still, she got up and walked around the room. She glanced at the phone lying on the cocktail table three times. He'd moved on and now where did that leave her. Ten agonizing days would turn into a month, then a year.

"To hell with it. I survived Cal. I can damn well get over Marc Preston," she mumbled to herself.

"What was that?" Robyn stared at her.

"Nothing," Alix said firmly. "I've got work to do."

She sat down and concentrated on shoving Marc Preston to back of her mind, where he belonged. When the phone rang, she didn't look up as Robyn answered it.

Robyn grinned as she held out the cordless phone.

"It's him."

Alix gasped then collected herself. "Okay," she said in a cool tone.

She carefully saved the file she was working on then took the phone. When he spoke a fire started in her belly and spread south.

"Sure. Tomorrow then. Bye." Alix hung up the phone. Aware Robyn was staring at her, she avoided returning her gaze. Several seconds passed.

"Tell me now or I'll scream!" Robyn blurted out finally.

"He wants to talk. So I'm going to meet him at his office around four." Alix couldn't stop the feline smile of satisfaction that spread across her face.

"Wow, he really wants you." Robyn tossed aside the magazine.

"I guess."

"Don't try that 'cool bitch' act with me. You're crazy about the guy." Robyn squinted at her. "Confess."

"I really like him, yes." Alix tried to steady her breathing.

"Then stop pushing him away. Next time he might not come back," Robyn said and picked up a thick issue of Glamour magazine.

Alix only nodded as she considered Robyn's warning. There was no doubt she looked forward to seeing Marc again, despite the send off she'd given him a few short days ago. Now what? Alix had to decide where she wanted to go with this thing. After a few more minutes of pretending she could concentrate on work, Alix headed for her bedroom.

"I'll help you," Robyn said, jumping up to follow her.

"Help me what?"

"Do your hair, nails and pick out just the right day to evening ensemble." Robyn looped her arm through one of Alix's. "I say the deep red skirt with your white silk blouse with the blouson neckline. You can wear a jacket, then take it off and accessorize for evening."

Alix stopped short. "I didn't say—" She broke off at the look Robyn gave her. "Good idea." They both giggled like teenagers planning for the prom.

Alix walked into the offices of Preston and Saks with her head up. She felt in control. "I'm here to see Mr. Preston," she told the receptionist.

"Ms. Harris, isn't it? Right this way." The lithe brunette led her down the hall and past Marc's office.

"Excuse me, where are we going?" Alix said.

"To the conference room."

The woman strode forward and opened double doors. Alix smiled when she saw Marc standing at one end of a highly polished oval oak conference table. One look at his magnificent body draped in an expensive custom silk blend suit and she melted. She dropped her purse on a chair and headed straight to him without hesitation.

"Baby, I'm so glad you blinked first. I was such an idiot. I'm so hot for you right now." Alix was about to wrap both arms around his neck when his wide-eyed expression stopped her.

"Ahem, Alix, this is my partner Jamal Saks. And uh, this is our graphic team." Marc stepped back and nodded as he looked over her shoulder.

"God, tell me you're joking," she whispered hoarsely.