

Four and a Half Steps to Heaven

by Norsebard

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This story depicts a loving relationship between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top-right corner right away and find something else to read.

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NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

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As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

Description: Valentine's Day turns into quite an event for the incurable skirt chaser Caitlin and her best friend, the self-confessed wallflower Debbie when the two women visit Rockin' Ruby's, the biggest girls-only bar in all of Bay City. As the evening progresses, one will hit the jackpot and one will have nothing but trouble, but they'll both have lots of fun trying to climb the Four And A Half Steps To Heaven...

FOUR AND A HALF STEPS TO HEAVEN

Caitlin O'Herlihy and Debbie Schwartz' arrival at the parking lot at Rockin' Ruby's a quarter past six on the evening of Valentine's Day could literally be heard a mile away.

As always, Caitlin drove her pristine gold-colored '69 VW Bug around on the lot in front of the establishment with the windows rolled down and the radio on '11' - and even the icy fact that it was only mid-February didn't stop her from giving the other people in the lot an earful of one of her favorite songs.

It didn't take long for the twenty-four year old self-confessed incurable skirt chaser to find a spot, and she soon pulled the Bug to a halt, surrounded by a variety of SUVs and trucks that all appeared to be huge behemoths next to the petite classic car. "Hey, we're here, Debbie," she said, giving her best friend a nudge with her elbow.

"So I see," Debbie said with a sigh. The twenty-five year old secretary - and self-confessed incurable wallflower - pulled the collar of her winter coat a bit higher and looked out at the busy parking lot. "There's a lot of people here tonight. Maybe we should-"

"Go inside, I agree," Caitlin said and opened the door. Stepping out, she adjusted her short, black leather jacket and quickly bent down to check her stylish, short hair in the wing mirror. "Yeah... ohhhhhh, yeah," she said, fluffing up a few stray auburn strands that had managed to work themselves loose despite the fact that she had put nearly an entire tube of gel into it.

When everything was in place, she flashed herself a crooked smile and a big thumbs-up into the mirror.

Chuckling over her friend's boundless vanity, Debbie stepped out of the Bug and closed the door behind her. Unlike Caitlin's outrageous outfit - leather shoes, form-fitting, faded and fashionably worn blue jeans and a low-cut, open-sided black tank top under a black leather jacket - Debbie was wearing a sensible winter coat, a sensible tan button-down shirt, a sensible pair of blue jeans and a sensible pair of shoes. Her mousy brown hair was styled in a sensible shoulder-length 'do that framed her pretty face, essentially the only of her features she was proud of.

Once Caitlin had pushed her Ray-Bans up her nose to look extra-extra cool, they were finally ready to go into Rockin' Ruby's, the best known and most popular girls-only bar in the entire Bay City area.

Ruby Albrecht had used her hard-earned dollars and cents - she was a retired pro-softball star - to buy and rebuild an old, unloved bar, and Rockin' Ruby's had fast become the favored hangout for the women who didn't feel at home in the mainstream clubs and bars.

The marquee over the entrance had been decorated with fake roses, plenty of colorful balloons and several Women's Symbols that were hooked together like wedding rings; in the middle of all the lush decor, a purple and silver banner proudly proclaimed the day to be 'Valentine's Day!'.

"Oh you better believe it is," Caitlin said as she opened the door and allowed her friend inside. "And we're gonna exploit that to the fullest... aren't we, Debbie?"

"Well, if you say so."

"I do say so," Caitlin said and closed the glass door behind them. Quickly performing a level three inspection of the territory and the new, potentially interesting pick-ups, she found one or two - or three - subjects that she'd like to get to know better as the evening and night went on.

Ruby had designed the interior of the bar to be simple yet effective: eight stools lined the shiny bar counter on the left of the room, and eight booths with round tables and red, circular benches with room for four in each took most of the remaining space in the first section. Further into the rectangular room, more booths had been put in that gave Rockin' Ruby's room for nearly one hundred and fifty guests in all.

Halfway down the bar room, a corridor led off to the dance floor that had been created as a separate room to give the women who wanted to dance a chance to do so without getting gawked at by the patrons - Caitlin hoped to give herself more than one workout in there later on.

Debbie took off her coat and put it on a hallstand just inside the door. Fluffing down the collar of her shirt, she also looked around at the other guests, though unlike her skirt-chasing friend, she did it to see if she knew anyone there. She didn't, as usual.

Reaching into her liner pocket, Caitlin took the humorous ad she had found online and made a beeline for the bulletin board that was next to an incredibly old payphone at the end of the bar. She knew that Ruby generally frowned upon people using the bulletin board for anything other than community info, but she was sure the bar owner wouldn't object to the piece of paper she pinned on it using a bright red pin shaped like a strawberry.

Once the ad was in place, she took a step back and put her hands on her hips. A smile slowly spread over her features as she read it:

"Wanted:

A tall well-built woman with good

reputation, who can cook frog

legs, who appreciates a good fuc-

schia garden, classical music and tal-

king without getting too serious.

-

Look for 5'6" brunette at the bar,
goes by the name Caitlin - all ages
are welcome."

"Hell yeah!" Caitlin exclaimed, grinning broadly. For good luck, she leaned in and kissed the ad before going back over to the bar.

Sitting down facing the room instead of the bar counter, Caitlin put her feet on the little peg at the base of the tall stool and pulled her leather jacket a bit off her shoulders so the gals who would walk past would get a glimpse of the racy, open-sided tank top. The light inside Rockin' Ruby's was cozy, but Caitlin kept her shades on at all times - obviously.

Debbie just sighed and toyed with a plain, white napkin that she had found on the shiny bar counter. "Caitlin, how long do you think that little act will work? You're not eighteen anymore, you know."

"Ohhhh, stab me in the heart, whydontcha!"

"Just telling you the truth," Debbie said and scrunched up her face when she accidentally pushed the napkin off the counter top and down on the floor in a spot where she couldn't reach it.

"Look, Debbie," Caitlin said and turned to her friend. "I got my style, you got yours. How long have we been best friends? Since kindergarten, right? I've always been this way, you know that. Hell, I was chasing girls in my diapers."

"Oh, I know," Debbie said, looking at Caitlin's provocative pose that somehow worked like magic when it came to attracting a certain kind of women. "You have it down to an art form, I'll give you that. It's just that it won't be long before you'll have gray hair, and-"

"Ohhhh! In fifteen years... maybe. And then I'll buy a bottle a' dye! What's with you tonight, hon?" Caitlin said and turned around. "Are you sick or something? C'mon, lighten up, okay? It's gonna be a fun night, I guarantee it. Look at all these great gals who are here tonight..." she continued and made a sweeping gesture with her hand.

"Yeah, but... with you looking like you do, I don't think anyone will even notice that I'm here," Debbie said with a sad half-shrug.

"Now that's not true... oh... stand by! Cap'n, we have sighted the natives and they look friendly!" Caitlin said and zoomed back to her flashy pose when she noticed a young woman reading the ad on the bulletin board.

Predictably, the twenty-something strolled leisurely over to Caitlin and stopped right in front of her. "Hi," the woman said, clearly looking elsewhere than at Caitlin's face.

The cool, crooked smile on said face was real as she returned the favor behind the dark Ray-Bans. "Hi," Caitlin said, studying the woman's appearance - rugged nubuck ankle boots, black jeans, a T-shirt in psychedelic colors and a purple wave of hair that came down into her eyes.

"Are you Caitlin?" the woman said, cocking her head to gaze at Caitlin with her deep brown eyes.

"That's right."

"Mmmm. I read your ad."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Whatcha think of it?"

"It was fun."

"Yeah. Wanna sit down and talk a little or something?"

"Nah."

"No?"

"Nah. I just wanna dance," the woman said and put out her hands.

Caitlin briefly turned her head to Debbie and whispered: "Keep my seat, will ya?" out of the corner of her mouth before she and the purple-haired woman left to waltz up the aisle between the bar stools and the booths on their way to the dance floor.

Debbie sighed and rubbed her brow.

A few moments later, Ruby Albrecht came the other way, wiping her hands on a towel. She quickly flipped open a hatch and slipped behind the bar counter where she picked up the errant napkin. At fifty-five, Ruby's hair had turned salt-and-pepper, but she still carried the same spunk and spirit that had earned her the nickname Rockin' Ruby in her professional days on the softball pitch. " 'Evening, Mizz Schwartz," she said, putting the napkin back on the pile next to a bowl of pretzels.

"Hi, Ruby."

"I just said hi to Caitlin O'Herlihy and a girl... I thought you'd only just got here?"

"We've been here for, oh, all of three minutes," Debbie said despondently.

"Oh... okay. Hey, that's a nice shirt. Is that new?"

"No," Debbie said and looked down at herself. "It's the same one I wore the last time... when you also asked me if it was new. Which it wasn't then, either."

"Oh... sorry," Ruby said and offered Debbie a polite smile. "Anyway. What can I get you?"

"Cocorum on the rocks, please. Would you mind making it a soft one?"

"Of course not, Debbie. Comin' right up," Ruby said and reached for the familiar white bottle.

Behind Debbie, the door opened and several animated women walked in. Debbie turned around and observed them as they laughed and spoke loudly to each other while taking off their jackets and coats and putting them on the hallstand. After a brief stay at the door, they moved further into Rockin' Ruby's. None of them had even glanced in her direction.

"Here you go, Debbie," Ruby said and put the drink and a napkin on the counter before tending to the new guests.

"Thank you, Ruby," Debbie said with a deep sigh as she gave Ruby a few dollars. Turning back around, she took a sip of the drink and savored the rich taste of the Caribbean.

Looking around the increasingly crowded - and noisy - bar room, her eye caught a sensibly dressed woman in her late twenties who was sitting by herself in one of the booths. The woman was nursing a tall, dark drink, but her body language suggested that she wasn't waiting for anyone in particular.

Debbie furrowed her brow and studied the woman. She had a round, pretty face that was framed by long, completely straight dark brown hair, but most things below her neck were obscured by the backrest of the bench she was sitting on and the dim light in the booths. Grumbling, Debbie shifted on her bar stool but she wasn't able to find a better vantage point.

The fact that she had promised Caitlin to keep her seat suddenly annoyed Debbie tremendously and she began to chew on her cheek at the thought of somebody else approaching the straight-haired woman before she'd had a rare go herself.

Counterbalancing that, the mere thought of going over to the booth and introducing herself to the mysterious woman was enough to make her knees knock. Choosing the safe route, she remained at the bar and took another sip of her Coconut rum.

Thirty seconds later, the dilemma was solved for her when another woman, a thirty-something redhead in an all-denim outfit - with sowed-on red flames on her jacket - sat down at the straight-haired woman's booth and played the opening gambit in the ancient game by cocking her head and offering the other woman a charming smile.

'Oh well. She wouldn't have been interested, anyhow,' Debbie thought and took another sip.

Ten minutes later, Caitlin came back from the dance floor - alone, but flushed and grinning. As she sat down on the bar stool that Debbie had kept for her, she rubbed her friend's back and offered her a sly wink. "Thanks, Debbie."

"You're welcome. Where's your purple-patch catch?" Debbie said, taking a sip of her Coconut rum.

"Oh, she's still dancing."

"Did you at least get her name?"

"No. Hi, Ruby!" Caitlin said, waving at Ruby Albrecht while discreetly dabbing a few drops of sweat away from her hairline with a folded-up handkerchief.

Ruby quickly smiled and nodded in Caitlin's direction, but finished tending to another customer before coming over. When she was there, she put out her hand and thumped Caitlin's fist. "Hey, Caitlin. What's the birddawg having tonight?"

"Oh you know me too well, Ruby," Caitlin said with a broad grin. "I'll have a Pink Demon, if you don't mind."

"A pinko coming right up. By the way, I'm guessing that's your ad?" Ruby said, pointing her thumb at the small piece of paper on the bulletin board that was attracting more attention from a late-forty-something woman and her girlfriend.

"Yeah."

"You know how I feel about that kinda stuff, Caitlin."

"I know, but it's just a little thing, Ruby. Please can it stay for a while? Please...?" Caitlin said and offered the bar owner the sweetest pair of puppy dog eyes she could muster.

"Save those eyes for your girlfriends, sweet cheeks. I'm old enough to be your mother. And besides..." - Ruby leaned in to speak for Caitlin's ears only - "You couldn't keep up with me."

"I believe you," Caitlin said with an ever-widening grin.

As Ruby stepped back to begin making the Pink Demon, Caitlin noticed that Debbie was shaking her head at her in that slow, deliberate way that usually meant somebody couldn't be-LIE-ve what was going on. "Awww... what?" she said, nudging Debbie's shoulder.

"Don't ask me 'what'. Not only didn't you get the other woman's name, now you're flirting with Ruby!" Debbie said with a snort.

"Come on, we're just fooling around," Caitlin said and rubbed Debbie's back again. "That purple-haired girl... it's all part of the master plan. Step one is complete, now we watch the other gals strut around while we wait for step two to come into play."

Debbie sighed dramatically and drained the last of her drink. "You're my best friend... but sometimes, I don't understand you."

In the meantime, Ruby put down the Pink Demon and a napkin on the shiny counter. Caitlin flashed her a thumbs-up and handed her a few bills.

"Awww... it's not that hard to understand," Caitlin said and took her drink. "C'mon, let's go over to a booth and I'll tell you all about it. Okay?"

"Well, okay, but-"

Before they could leave the row of bar stools, the forty-something woman and her girlfriend who had been reading the ad came up to Caitlin and Debbie and blocked their path. "Hi," the first of them said, cautiously eyeing the leather jacket and the revealing tank top.

"Hi," Caitlin said, equally cautiously eyeing the two women who were both wearing high-quality business skirt suits, pumps, big hair and tastefully applied makeup.

"Are you Caitlin...? Or should I perhaps call you Corky?"

"Uh... no, I'm, uh... Caitlin. Yeah."

"Right," the woman said and winked at her companion. "You've misspelled fuchsia. You have it as f-u-c-s-c-h-i-a, but it's supposed to be f-u-c-h-s-i-a."

"Okay?" Caitlin said scrunched up her face. She started thinking about what the ad actually said and suddenly worked out that the two businesswomen had read it as-is instead of the first, third and fifth lines as intended. "Ohhhh... well, it's actually an... uh..."

"Just wanted to let you know. 'Kay, Corky?" the first woman said before she put her hand around the other woman's waist and led her up the aisle towards the booths at the far end of the bar.

Scratching her chin, Caitlin tracked the two well-dressed women as they walked away, noticing how their rears were wiggling hypnotically under the tight skirts. "Uh, thanks. Thanks a lot."

"You coulda been the meat in a glam sandwich there, Caitlin," Debbie said with a grin as she nudged Caitlin's side.

"Yeah... I didn't think that anyone wouldn't read it right... huh. Anyway, let's go over to a booth and I'll tell you everything there is to know about courting gals."

"If it can't be helped," Debbie said with a dramatic sigh as she jumped off the bar stool. "By the way, who's Corky?"

"Beats me..."

Right behind them, Ruby was polishing the counter to make it extra shiny. Grabbing a handful of peanuts from a sample bag, she popped them into her mouth and leaned forward. "It's a character from the movie Bound, Caitlin," she said, chewing on the dry nuts. "Played by Gina Gershon. She likes to dress in tanks and leather jackets. Like you."

"Oh. Must be an ancient movie."

"Nah, it came out in... hmmm, 1995 or 1996... probably '96. It was kinda popular in the community."

"I was seven years old then, Ruby," Caitlin said flatly.

"And I was eight," Debbie added as an afterthought.

Ruby stopped chewing long enough to calculate how old she had been when it came out. The results weren't too glorious, so she resumed chewing with a vigor, mumbling something inaudible while giving the counter an extra-strenuous polish.

"Sorry, Ruby," Debbie said, but she was whisked away by Caitlin before she could ask the bar keep about getting a new Coconut rum.

"Right," Caitlin said as she put the Pink Demon down on the round table and placed her jeans-clad rear on the booth's plush, red bench seat. "Now, if I'm moving too fast, just let me know and I'll spell it out for you in a real simple way, okay?"

"Oh ha, ha, Caitlin. I'm not a complete noob, you know," Debbie said and started chewing on one of her ice cubes.

"I know, but I can hear you need a refresher course. Okay, step one is to establish contact," Caitlin said and put her fists together. "With me so far?"

"Yeah, yeah... sheesh."

"Step one and a half is to do something fun the first time you're together. Maybe crack a silly joke, or do what me and the purple girl did before, a little dancing," Caitlin said and took a sip of her Pink Demon. "Then you split up for the time being."

"How about buying her a drink?"

"No no, that's too soon, Debbie."

Grimacing, Debbie leaned back in her seat and began to toy with her empty glass. After a brief delay, she winked and pushed the glass towards Caitlin. "How about *you* buying *me* a drink?"

"Sure," Caitlin said with a grin as she took the empty glass. "Another Cocorum on the rocks?"

"Yes, please."

"In a moment. Now, step two is initiated if she comes back. If she's gone through the trouble of finding you again in the crowd, it means she's interested. It has to be her, though... you can't seek her out. It would give her the impression that you're desperate for her attention," Caitlin said and left the booth with the empty glass.

"Yeah, but... I don't get that part, Caitlin... huh," Debbie said, but Caitlin was already over by the bar counter. She leaned back in her seat and scratched her jaw. Needing to speak out loud to hear herself think over the music from the dance floor and the general din of the crowd, she went into a hand-waving soliloquy: "But what happens if we both sit and wait for one another? What if I really am desperate? What if we're *both* desperate? That's not a good mix. Hell, that's a fire hazard in a crowded place such as this... I mean, spontaneous combustion and whatnot... one of us needs to make the first move, I understand that, but we can't jus-"

Looking up at the shadow that had fallen on her, Debbie choked on her tongue when she realized the long-haired woman from before was staring at her like she had two heads. "Hi," Debbie croaked, smoothing down a crease on the non-existent tablecloth. "I was just... uh... rehearsing a speech I need to give at work tomorrow... and... uh..."

"Right," the other woman said before moving on towards the dance floor. Much to Debbie's consternation, the woman was holding hands with the denim-clad redhead who had approached her earlier.

As Debbie kept her eyes on the two women, she couldn't help but notice that although the long-haired woman's figure was a tad on the full side, she - and her gently swaying hips under her white, pleated dress - had plenty of presence.

Caitlin came back a little while later and put two glasses on the table. "Here you go... a Cocorum for you and a backup Club Soda Twister for me."

"Thanks," Debbie said despondently, feeling ready to pack it all in and head home.

"So," Caitlin said, oblivious to her friend's depressed state. Always on the lookout for pretty girls, she just had time to smile at a blonde who came walking past before she slid into the red bench. "Where were we? O-yeah, step two. When she comes back, you ask her-"

"Did you see that girl just now? The one with the long hair?"

"The blonde?"

"No, a cute brunette in a white dress. She was with a redhead."

"No...?" Caitlin said and craned her neck to see up the aisle, but the two women had already gone onto the dance floor. "Eh. One for me?"

"One for me," Debbie said quietly.

"Wo-hoo! You're a quick study! Go get her, dawg!" Caitlin said and reached over the table to slap Debbie a high-five.

Debbie just shook her head vigorously. "Noooooooo... she was with someone else. A redhead, like I said."

"C'mon, slap me a five... Debbie, hey..." Caitlin said, still holding up her hand. When her plea for a high-five remained well and truly ignored, she pulled her arm back and snorted loudly.

"ANYway, step two... when you've re-established contact, you should buy her a drink and sit down close to her so you can lean into her side. Most girls love that. It's the intimacy, get it? The shared space. If you can follow that up with a little joke or something to make her smile, you're almost there."

Debbie sighed and took a sip of her new drink. "You might as well stop talking now, Caitlin. You're just wasting your breath on me."

"Oh, ye of little faith! Or oomph, even! No, no, we're just getting to the good stuff," Caitlin said and wiggled her eyebrows. "Step three is holding hands underneath the table. If she turns your hand around so her own is between yours and her thigh, you've still got some way to go. However, if she allows your hand to touch her thigh, you're a shoo-in for step four. Wanna know what step four is?"

"Don't bother. I can guess," Debbie said and let out another sigh.

"Step four is where you'll sing Heaven Here With Me 'cos that's where you're going."

"Yeah, right. You're making this up as you go along, aren't you?" Debbie mumbled and looked down at her hands.

Feigning shock, Caitlin made a horrified face and drew the sign of the cross in front of her. "Oh, no! Cross my heart an' hope to die... with a lovely girlie by my si'e!"

Debbie rolled her eyes repeatedly. With her good mood evaporating rapidly, she was about to tell Caitlin that she wanted to cut the evening short and catch a cab home when the purple-haired woman came up to their booth and put her hands on their table.

"Hi again," the woman said, wearing a smile that spelled out very clearly that she was ready for step two - or even skip directly ahead to step four.

"Hi. Can I get you something?" Caitlin said in a buttery voice that made Debbie roll her eyes all over again.

"Well, I was thinking..."

Caitlin put on her best crooked smile and cocked her head to look her fanciest for the twenty-something woman. Leaning forward, she pushed the leather jacket slightly back from her shoulders to expose a bit of flesh. "Yeah?"

"You wanna dance again? I feel like dancing tonight. I'm in the zone," the woman said and slowly gyrated her jeans-clad hips left and right.

With her eyes fixated on the woman's gently moving hips, Caitlin chucked down most of her Pink Demon and scooted out of the booth in an almighty hurry. "We can dance... no problem," she said, discreetly checking out her dance partner from all angles. "No problem at all... hey, by the way... I'm Caitlin."

"I'm Simone."

"Oh, that's a nice name. Is that Native American?"

Simone just giggled and put out her hand. As Caitlin took it, she winked at Debbie who responded with a sigh and a tired, despondent shake of the head.

The separate room housing the dance floor was perfectly square and equipped with three rows of multi-colored disco lights in the ceiling, two rows of benches at the far end for those who needed a break, and a raised dais at the end closest to the entrance.

To create the best acoustic for the pumping music in the relatively small room, Ruby Albrecht had spent a small fortune on getting the ceiling designed in a way that the music sounded natural regardless of where the dancers were in the room. On occasion - typically theme nights - she hired a female DJ to do a live set on the raised dais, but an advanced music selection computer in the basement took care of the playlists on most nights.

The dance floor was already quite packed when Simone arrived with Caitlin in tow, but they managed to find a space and began to dance along to the enticing rhythms playing through the hidden speakers.

Caitlin and Simone wiggled, snaked, shook and shimmied back and forth on the dance floor; sometimes close enough to hold hands and sometimes so far apart that someone else could step between them.

Despite the fact that the dance floor was bathed in a visual cacophony of semi-darkness and lights flashing red, green, blue and yellow, Caitlin kept her sunglasses on at all times - mostly because she thought it looked cool, but also because it gave her an opportunity to check out other dancers without her chosen partner ever noticing anything.

One of the times where she was close enough to the purple-haired woman to put her hands on her shapely rear and give it a little squeeze, she happened to look over her shoulder at two women behind them. One was a long-haired brunette and the other was a redhead, and she remembered Debbie mentioning such a pair.

Caitlin thought the brunette and the redhead didn't look at all compatible, but she knew that from time to time, appearances could be misleading - however in this case, her finely calibrated instincts proved to be correct, because when the redhead tried to kiss the brunette on the lips, the long-haired woman shied back.

That move seemed to go down like a lead balloon with the redhead. Making a disgusted face, she said something to the long-haired woman that Caitlin couldn't hear, but she was certain it was a nasty comment.

"Hey..." Simone said when she noticed that Caitlin was looking at someone else than her. "I'm right here, you know."

"Oh, I know, I know," Caitlin said and reached behind Simone to give her rear another little squeeze.

Behind them, the redhead walked away leaving the long-haired woman standing alone in the middle of the dance floor. With her shoulders slumping, she turned around and shuffled out of the room.

Simone replied to getting her rear squeezed by pulling Caitlin into a hug and commenced dancing very closely. After a little while with plenty of bodily contact, Caitlin was about to suggest finding a secluded corner somewhere when the pleasant moment was ruined.

"What the hell?! If it ain't Caitlin O'Hubbahubba!" a visibly drunk late twenty-something woman said, putting a hand on Caitlin's shoulder and pulling her quite roughly away from Simone.

"Aw, Jeez," Caitlin mumbled and tried to pry the hand off her, but the other woman was holding on too tightly. "Not now, Frankie, okay? I'm busy here!"

The heavily inebriated Francine Rowe - wearing wild hair, blue jeans and a black shirt with the top four buttons undone to allow the world to see the gold chain around her neck, the swell of her tanned breasts and the top of her black lace bra - didn't seem to listen because she rudely grabbed Caitlin by the collar of her leather jacket and yanked her into an awkward embrace. "Why didntcha call me, Caitlin? Ya said you'd call me... but ya didn't."

"Look-"

"Ain't I good enough for ya, O'Hubbahubba? We had a great couple a' nights, didn't we?" Francine said and tried to push her hand down Caitlin's jeans. "I think we did. Ya shoulda called me... I was just lying there all by my naked lonesome, waiting for your call."

"No, Frankie!" Caitlin said and squirmed wildly to get the drunk woman's hands off her.

"If ya kiss me now, everything is okay again..." Francine said and yanked Caitlin towards her.

Just inches before her lips would have made contact with Francine's heavily inebriated self, Caitlin managed to tear herself free of the drunk woman's grip and took several steps back. "Not now! Okay? Go home and get some sleep, Frankie. Jesus, you're embarrassing!" she said, straightening down her all-important collar.

As she turned back around, Simone had vanished.

"Wha...? Hey... Simone, where'd ya go?" Caitlin said, looking all over to get a fix on her purple-haired dance partner. When she was unable to see her anywhere, she clenched her fists and spun back towards Francine who was swaying like a leaf in the wind. "Frankie, you... you... thanks a bunch! Stay the hell away from me!" - with that, Caitlin stomped out of Francine's drunken reach to search for Simone.

Meanwhile, Debbie moved back up to the row of bar stools after being asked by a pair of gals who were clearly eager to find a private corner if they could inherit the booth. Blushing, she searched for a free spot while carrying the drinks she and Caitlin had been enjoying. From time to time, she looked back at the booth where the gals were already getting down to business.

Just as she was walking past the bar stools, two women left to go to the dance floor and she quickly seized the two vacant seats. Sitting down on one of them, she placed a napkin on the other to let people know that she was keeping it for someone.

Unfortunately, that didn't stop the seat from being taken almost immediately. Gulping down a sip of her Coconut rum, Caitlin turned around to let the other woman know that the seat wasn't free - but stopped with a jerk when she realized that it was the long-haired woman she had gazed at earlier.

Up close, Debbie could see that the long-haired woman was younger than she had thought, probably only in her mid-twenties, and that she was really quite pretty with a fair complexion and pale brown eyes. She was also on the bulky side of the average, but Debbie wasn't bothered in the least by such trivialities.

Feeling her heart speed up to such an extent that it got stuck in her throat, Debbie tried to remember the four and a half steps Caitlin had told her about, but gave up when she realized it had all turned to mush after her latest Cocorum. "Uh... Hi. I'm Debbie."

The other woman turned around and gave her such a sad look that it made Debbie's heart clench. It was obvious she had been crying, and even as they were looking at each other, another tear escaped from the long-haired woman's pale brown eyes and trickled down her cheek.

She wiped it away in a hurry with the back of her hand, but Debbie had seen it.

"I'm Samantha," she said in a voice thick with suppressed emotions.

Debbie's instincts took over and she reached into her right front pocket and found a lavender handkerchief. "Here... uh, it's clean," she said with an apologetic grin.

Samantha looked at the handkerchief and then at Debbie for a few seconds, almost like she had a hard time understanding what was going on. Eventually, she took the offered hankie and dabbed her cheeks and her eyes, careful not to smear her tastefully applied eyeliner. "Thank you," she said as she gave it back to Debbie.

"You're welcome. Listen... hand on my heart, I'm not playing a game with you... but would you like anything to drink?"

Samantha sighed and turned around to look Debbie in the eye. At first, the silence between the two women was deafening, but a small smile creasing Samantha's lips broke the tension. "I'd like that very much, thank you. I don't drink alcohol so I'll have a Fizzy Alexander. I can see you already got plenty there, huh?" Samantha said with a chuckle as she pointed at the Coconut rum, the Club Twister and the last drops of the Pink Demon that Debbie had placed in front of her on the counter.

"Oh, only the Cocorum is mine, ha ha. I'm holding the others for a friend who's out dancing."

"Ohhh. Okay," Samantha said with a very nice smile that Debbie felt compelled to respond to with a very similar grin.

'Was that step one...?' Debbie thought, trying to think over the din of the crowd. 'Or was it step one and a half...? Oh, I can't remember... hell, according to Caitlin's rules, I wasn't even supposed to offer Samantha a drink, but... ah, who gives a roasted turkey!' - "Ruby!" she said out loud as the barkeep came down to their end of the counter.

"Hi again, Debbie. D'you need anything special?" Ruby said, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Yes, I'd like a Fizzy Alexander for my new friend Samantha here, please," Debbie said and very, very briefly put her hand on top of Samantha's.

Just as she moved her hand away, Samantha looked at her with a warm, positive gleam in her eyes that nearly made Debbie's heart skip a beat. The contact had felt so good that she wanted to do it again at once, but she didn't want to push her luck so early in the evening so she kept her hands to herself - however, she couldn't stop a cute, shy smile from flashing across her face.

Ruby looked at the two young women and broke out in a wide grin at the sight of the very definition of the word overture. "You got it. One Fizzy A comin' right up."

"Thanks, Ruby." -- "Thank you," Debbie and Samantha said at the same time, prompting another pair of identical, shy smiles.

Once Ruby had provided the Fizzy Alexander, Debbie turned around on her seat so she was facing Samantha. "If you think I'm butting in where I shouldn't, just tell me... but why were you crying before?"

"Oh, that was..." Samantha said but fell quiet. She took a sip of her raspberry fizz-Coke mix and seemed to savor the sweet, sparkly taste. "Well..."

Debbie leaned in and once again put her hand on top of Samantha's, though this time it was for support and not a thrill. "It's all right, Samantha. You don't have-"

"The woman I was dancing with called me an f'ing porker because I refused to kiss her," Samantha said with a shrug.

"What a bitch!" Debbie exclaimed loudly - so loudly in fact that not only did she attract the attention of Ruby, she made four other patrons at the bar turn around and stare at her.

Samantha shrugged and took another sip of her drink. "I'm used to it. I guess I'm overweight, so..."

"Don't listen to her, Samantha... you look great... and she's still a bitch," Debbie repeated just as strongly, though this time she managed to keep her voice under control. "If there's one thing I hate, and I do mean hate with a capital H, it's when people use other people's shortcomings or weaknesses for cheap, snide remarks! Especially in our community! We've got other battles to fight, we shouldn't go around creating more drama amongst ourselves out of malice... for cryin' out loud!"

Debbie knew she was about to embark on her favorite pet peeve subject, so she quickly leaned her head back and gulped down a large swig of her Cocorum before she'd make a fool of herself in front of complete strangers - even so, her cheeks were already burning from the indignation.

Samantha shrugged again but suddenly turned around and took Debbie's hands in her own. "Thanks. And I agree wholeheartedly," she said, giving the hands a little squeeze.

At the same time, Caitlin stomped up the aisle on her return from her fruitless search for Simone. Angrily dabbing her hairline and forehead with her folded-up handkerchief, she came to a hard stop when she realized that Debbie was holding hands with the long-haired woman and wearing an expression that said she was close to knocking on the Pearly Gates.

Caitlin's jaw slipped halfway down her tank top, but her shock was quickly replaced by a strong sense of happiness for her best friend. Instead of intruding on them, she caught Debbie's eye and gave her a double thumbs-up and a little shimmy-shake to congratulate her before turning around and starting another search for greener pastures elsewhere in the jungle known as Rockin' Ruby's.

Debbie smiled and winked at her friend. The sensation flowing through her from the gentle contact was so strong that she felt more alive than she had done for months, if not years. She could only vaguely remember the last time somebody had held her hands like that - and even then, it hadn't meant a thing compared to the present sweet encounter.

As Samantha squeezed her hands again and moved her own back to the counter, Debbie knew it wouldn't be the last time they had shared a heartfelt touch - at least, not if she had anything to say about it.

She could hardly get Samantha out of her thoughts, but Caitlin's voice explaining the various steps kept interfering with her focus. *'Oh... is this where I have to leave her just to prove I'm not desperate...? But I am desperate! After feeling her touch, I'm... I'm more desperate than ever! Dammit, Caitlin, why'dya have to tell me those asinine steps...'*

The situation was further complicated by the fact that she needed to visit the restroom. Chewing on her cheek, she didn't want the entire row of patrons to know about it, so she leaned in and whispered into Samantha's ear: "I have to go powder my nose... but I'll be right back. Okay?"

"Sure, Debbie," Samantha said with a smile.

"Great!" Debbie said and hopped off the bar stool. "Uh... Ruby?"

"Yeah?" the bartender said, closing the cash register at the other end of the counter.

"Would you mind making me a new Cocorum? I'll pay when I get back. I just gotta..."

"Sure," Ruby said with a grin. "I'll get right on it."

Debbie felt her restroom situation go from 'pretty soon' to 'urgent', so she gave Ruby a thumbs-up and a loud "Thanks!" before hurrying up the aisle.

Returning from the restroom where the line had been a lot longer than she had expected, Debbie quickly greeted Caitlin who was busy chatting up a cute blonde in one of the booths before continuing back to Samantha.

She only made it another five steps before she came to a screeching halt. Coming around the corner, she had a clear view of the counter and the row of bar stools, and quickly spotted a very

familiar denim-clad redhead sitting next to Samantha - on Debbie's seat, no less! - who was trying really hard to get back in fashion.

Debbie clenched her fists and scrunched up her face at the sight of the unwanted competition. "Rats..." she growled under her breath, thinking about what she could do to make the redhead go away - or what she could do to the redhead, full stop.

The sight of Samantha angrily shaking her head and pushing the redhead away was all Debbie needed to go into full-blown Warrior Princess-mode, and she strode down the aisle intending to give the redhead a fist-sized piece of her mind.

At the exact moment she got there, Samantha did it for her by slapping the redhead hard across the cheek.

With a palm print on her left cheek that matched the color of her hair perfectly, the redhead shot up from the bar stool and spewed out a hateful, vitriolic storm of words directed at Samantha that contained so many F-, S- and C-bombs that it nearly made the mirror behind the counter crack.

Fortunately for all of them - not least the condition of Debbie's delicate ears - Ruby Albrecht came flying around the corner of the bar and grabbed the redhead by the scruff of her denim jacket and the seat of her jeans.

"Congratulations a-hole, you've just earned yourself a two months suspension!" Ruby roared as she dragged the kicking and screaming redhead towards the main entrance, flung open the door and threw her outside.

Once Ruby got back in and shut the door behind her, she put her hands on her hips and stared long and hard at the patrons who had witnessed the ugly scene. "Anybody else wanna cause trouble? No no, don't hold back. There's plenty o' room outside."

Predictably, everyone ducked their head and concentrated on their drinks - except Debbie who rushed over to the sobbing Samantha and pulled her into a hug.

"Samantha, are you all right...? Stupid me, of course you're not..." she said and hurriedly sat down on the seat recently vacated by the redhead. She noticed at once that Samantha was sobbing and jumped back up to pull her into an embrace. "Shhh... come on, shhh... it's okay. That bitch has been thrown out. She won't bother you again. C'mon..." she whispered, running her hands up and down the sobbing woman's back.

The din slowly returned to the bar, and before long, things were back to normal for most of the patrons. "Hey, Samantha," Debbie said, wiping a few tears away from Samantha's cheeks with her fingers.

"You were right, she really was a bitch," Samantha said between sobs.

"Calling her a bitch is almost too kind. Yeah," Debbie said with a sad chuckle. "Hey, one of the booths is available... do you wanna go over there and sit and talk for a little while?"

"Yeah," Samantha said and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Getting up, she quickly moved across the aisle and scooted the furthest she could go into the free booth so she would be out of sight of the patrons at the bar.

When Debbie wanted to take the drinks she had been holding on to for the better part of forty minutes, she noticed that the redhead had poured Caitlin's Pink Demon and the Club Twister into her brand new Cocorum, ruining it completely. "Oh, that damn... mmm, mmmm, mmmm! Troublemaker!" Debbie growled, shaking her head angrily.

"Looks like you need a new round of drinks, Debbie," Ruby said, wiping down a glass and putting it on a shelf behind the bar.

After pushing the three glasses away with a disgusted look on her face, Debbie shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, it was that damn redhead... she did it purpose, I'll bet."

"Probably. Tell you what... you and whatshername...?"

"Samantha."

"You and Samantha look so great together that the next round is on the house."

"Oh, you don't have to do that, Ruby."

Already lining up two fresh glasses and the bottles she'd need, Ruby flashed Debbie a wide grin. "No, I insist. You still owe me for the last one, though."

"Oh... right," Debbie said and found a few bills.

"Thanks. Coconut rum and a Fizzy Alexander?"

"Oh, yes, please. Thank you very much. Uh, we're right over there, in the first booth," Debbie said and pointed at where Samantha was sitting. "Okay?"

"Okie-dokie, Debbie. Won't be long."

Twenty-five minutes later, Caitlin strolled down the aisle - alone, but with a smile on her face. There was a partial lipstick smear on her right cheek, another on the left side of her chin, and one across her own lips for good measure. "Hi, guys. Mind if I sit down for a couple a' minutes?" she said to Debbie and Samantha, putting her hands on the backrest of the first booth.

"Okay by me," Debbie said and turned towards Samantha. "But I don't know how Samantha feels about it...?"

"Oh, I'm calmer now, thank you... go on, have a seat," Samantha said and gestured at the bench. When Caitlin scooted in and put her elbows on the table, Samantha wet her lips and put out her hand. "Hi, I'm Samantha."

"Caitlin, howdy-do," Caitlin said with a grin.

Samantha smiled back and looked from Debbie to Caitlin. "Debbie has told me a lot about you, actually."

"Yeah? Only good stuff, I hope." A sly grin creased Caitlin's lips when she noticed that Debbie and Samantha's hands weren't in sight - it probably meant they were closely entwined underneath the table. "Or...?" she continued when Debbie's silence was rapidly becoming troublesome.

Debbie laughed at the look on Caitlin's face, and she leaned forward and patted her friend's arm with her free hand. "You'll never know, Caitlin."

"Oh, ha ha."

"And now we're on that subject... you might wanna... uh," Debbie said, pointing at her own cheek, chin and lips.

"Whut?" - Caitlin quickly ran her fingers across her facial skin and found plenty of lipstick residue. "Oh... occupational hazard. Thanks, Debbie."

"You're welcome. Here, you can use my napkin," Debbie said and pushed the square, white napkin across the table.

"Thanks. Hey, what's that I heard about a fight? Was that you?"

"Yeah," Debbie said and gave Samantha's hand a squeeze under the table. "Well, it was mostly Ruby. She threw out a redhead who had left her good manners at home."

"Mmmm. I saw her on the dance floor. A real piece of work that one," Caitlin said, nodding solemnly.

Commotion at the main entrance made all three young women crane their necks to check if it was the aforementioned redhead who had returned for round two - fortunately, it wasn't. Instead, a woman the size of a two-story brick house laughed noisily at something and took off a winter windbreaker to reveal a bright red Bay City Fire Department shirt that was suspiciously tight over her arms, no doubt chosen because it accentuated her well-defined biceps to the Nth degree.

The firefighter - sporting a one-inch crewcut - was accompanied by a very elegant, dark-haired woman in a cream business suit who definitely caught the attention of several of the patrons at

the bar. Once she had taken off a long, camelhair coat and put it over her arm, the striking couple made their way up the aisle, saying a quick Good evening to Caitlin, Debbie and Samantha when they walked past.

Once the couple were out of earshot, Debbie leaned in towards Samantha and whispered "Wow, opposites attract, huh?" in her ear, earning herself a muted snicker.

"What the hell... is it butch o'clock already?" Caitlin said and checked her wristwatch which read five past eleven. "At least she was with someone... Jeez, I'd never be able to compete with that," she mumbled under her breath.

"Oh come on, there's no way you're going for the same kind of gal, Caitlin," Debbie said and nudged Caitlin's leg underneath the table. "And besides, you're attractive... sexy, even. Sorta. Nah, forget that part," Debbie said and snickered loudly.

"Gee, thanks a lot, hon!" Caitlin said and raised her sunglasses for the first time since she had put them on. "Do I know someone who's had a Cocorum too many? I think I do," she said, returning the favor by nudging Debbie's legs.

Samantha leaned in and pointed an index finger at her two companions. "Ummm, I'm just curious... but have you guys ever-"

"Oh, hell no!" Debbie exclaimed loudly and broke down in a devastating snicker-attack that left her face quite red.

Caitlin ground her jaw a couple of times but decided that two could play that game. "No. But we've been best friends since kindergarten. Of course, sometimes I have the feeling that Debbie never went any further," she said with a broad grin.

When Debbie stuck out her tongue, Caitlin responded in kind and decided to up the stakes by wiggling her hands on the sides of her head and letting out a "Nyah-nyah!" that made Debbie break down in a new surge of laughter.

Laughing along with her best friend, Caitlin suddenly noticed the cute blonde she had been exchanging kisses with standing at the bulletin board where she was studying the joke ad. "Oh!" she said and scooted away from the bench seat. "Gotta go... nearly at step four!"

Debbie didn't have time to make a comment before Caitlin had moved away from the table, so she settled for wiping her eyes and taking Samantha's hands into her own again. "Now... where were we? Oh yeah," she said and gave them a good squeeze.

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Half past eleven, Ruby went over to an old brass ship's bell that was hanging on the wall at the far end of the bar. Once the hands on her wristwatch hit eleven thirty exactly, she rang the bell three times to get everyone's attention.

"Ladies!" she said in a stentorian voice so everyone could hear her. "It's now eleven thirty... Valentine's Day is almost over. Those of you who have found someone, please come to the bar where you can get a free red rose for the object of your desire. Those who are still by yourself... you gotta work harder, girls!"

As the patrons made their opinions heard about Ruby's suggestion, Debbie turned around to face Samantha. "Oh, what a fun idea!" she exclaimed giddily. Inside, her giddiness rapidly turned to nervousness and then outright fear - *'What right do I have to impose myself on Samantha when she's just been treated so badly by the redhead? On the other hand, we've talked really well... and she's squeezing my hands all the time... and she's smiling at me... oh hell, if I don't at least try, I'll beat myself silly for it in the morning...'* she thought, working up the courage to finally ask. "Uh... ummm... uh... my lady, may I offer you a rose?"

A few seconds went by without a reaction, but then a genuine smile graced Samantha's features. "You certainly may," she said and pretended to swoon, "...but only if I may offer you one as well?"

"Oh...! You certainly may!" Debbie said with a series of ecstatic winks.

Holding hands, they quickly left the booth to get into the line of women that had formed at the bar.

Once there, Debbie looked around for Caitlin and the cute blonde but couldn't see them anywhere. The line was getting quite full, proving that it had been a successful evening at Rockin' Ruby's for most of the patrons. Debbie even spotted the purple-haired Simone who was standing next to a shorter gal with flaming red hair and several piercings in her nose and eyebrows.

"Don't get your undies in a wad! There's plenty here for everybody!" Ruby said loudly as the line began to move erratically out of sheer impatience.

"I don't want no thorns on my rose, bud!" someone joked, creating a ripple of chuckling and lewd whistles.

"Haw, haw... you won't! I've nipped them off myself... all of them... took me the entire afternoon," Ruby said and gave out the flowers to the women in the slightly disorderly line.

When Debbie and Samantha finally received their roses, they quickly returned to the booth, but halfway there, Samantha came to a halt and turned to face Debbie. "Debbie... my lady... would you like to dance with me?" she said and offered Debbie her rose.

"Oh God, yes!" Debbie said and scooped up the offered flower. Sniffing it, she smiled so broadly that the shine of her teeth nearly lit up the bar. "And would you like to dance with me, my lady?" she said in a buttery voice.

"I would," Samantha said, snatched Debbie's hand and led her down towards the dance floor with determined steps.

They went so fast - mostly against the stream, as usual - that Debbie hardly had a chance to look at any of the people they went past, but the sight of Caitlin sitting all by herself in a booth and sulking into a clear drink made Debbie pause. "Hey, Samantha, just a sec..." she said, pulling at Samantha's hand to make her stop.

Leaning down, she took one look at Caitlin's world class pout and understood that her friend had been dumped again. "What's up with you tonight? That didn't work either?"

"Nah," Caitlin said and took a long swig of her Club Twister. "She was only experimenting."

"Oh... sorry."

"Eh. Hi, Samantha," Caitlin said with a grin when she noticed Samantha tripping impatiently.

"Hi again, Caitlin. Listen, uh... we were just gonna..." Samantha said, pointing her thumb at the entrance to the dance floor.

Caitlin let out a loud laugh and held up her hands. "Hey, I'm not the one who's stopping you! Go shake your booties!"

Debbie wanted to apologize for not being there for Caitlin, but Samantha had already resumed pulling her through the crowd so she only had time for a shrug and a quick grin that Caitlin responded to in kind.

Zooming onto the dance floor, Samantha quickly found a good spot for them - not too crowded and not too close to the thumping speakers. When Debbie caught up with her, they took each other's hands and began to wiggle back and forth to the beat of the pumping music, sending Samantha's pleated skirt into a frenzy of activity.

They had attached their roses to their clothing - with little clips Ruby had painstakingly put on the stems when she had removed the thorns - and took full advantage of it by frequently leaning in to smell each other's flowers.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue before," Samantha said into Debbie's ear when her dance partner was close enough to her.

"Oh, you're welcome. I mean... how could I not?"

"Not everyone would have, Debbie. Believe me."

"What? Why not?"

"Oh, you know," Samantha said with a shrug, suddenly appearing conscious about her larger size.

Debbie took a half step back but kept her hands on Samantha's arms. After the two women had wiggled back and forth for a few beats, Debbie sighed and pulled Samantha into a hug. "That sucks, frankly. Listen to me, you look fantastic. You hear me? Don't let nobody tell you differently."

Samantha shrugged again but kept the firm grip she had around Debbie's back. "But they do. Often."

"What bullshit! Sometimes, I'm not sure I even like women..." Debbie exclaimed loudly. "Uh... I mean... uh, not like that," she added as an afterthought.

Samantha chuckled and pulled back from the hug. Just then, the uptempo dance hit that had been playing segued into a far slower, more intimate beat, and Samantha's eyes conveyed a loud and clear message that she was ready for a little bit more if Debbie was interested.

Debbie was. With a smile, she leaned in until she was only an inch or two away from Samantha's lips. Gazing deeply into her pale brown eyes, she asked silently if it was all right to go ahead.

The confirmation came with a shy smile and a little nod. Debbie wasted no time in closing the distance between them and brushing her lips against Samantha's. The initial contact was backed up by a longer kiss that felt so good to Debbie that she could hardly believe it was really happening.

As she pulled back - reluctantly - she could see by the dazed yet golden look in Samantha's eyes that she was experiencing the same emotions.

For several seconds, Debbie and Samantha just stared wide-eyed at each other, but the slow, sensual beat of the music won out and they were soon enjoying each other's lips one more time as they swayed to the lazy rhythms.

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Caitlin sighed and craned her neck to look at the jeans-clad rear of an early-thirty-something Latina who had just come past her booth. With the Latina's pale brown skin, her friendly face, her bleached white-blonde hair and - most importantly - her mix of denim and leather clothes, Caitlin quickly deemed her stiff competition, not a potential prize.

Sighing again, she drained the last drops of her latest Club Twister and went up to the bar. On her way there, she noticed with some disappointment that the pretty Latina had already found a cute brunette to talk to.

"Hi, Ruby," Caitlin said and put the empty glass down on the counter. "Another Twister if ya got the time."

"Sure. Down on your luck tonight, sailor?" Ruby said with a wicked gleam in her eye.

"Boy, you have no idea... no idea at all," Caitlin said and put her elbows on the shiny counter. She looked around at the fine selection of women and felt even more dispirited than she had been earlier. "I mean... look at them... look at me... I don't know what's wrong tonight, Ruby," she said and raised her sunglasses to wipe her bleary eyes.

"Maybe it's just one of those nights... you can't score every week, huh?"

"Well, just for your information, I don't call it scoring, I call it spreading the joy! I happen to appreciate women!"

"Of course," Ruby said and put a new Club Twister and a napkin down on the counter.

After giving Ruby a few bills, Caitlin picked up the drink and took a small sip. "But tonight... man. Everyone has been stonewalling me and I can't figure out why."

"Maybe it's the ad? I've heard that some thinks it's kinda weird."

"Wha...? No, it's not, it's funny! If *I* think it's funny, others are bound to do so as well. I mean... hang on," - Caitlin quickly went over to the bulletin board and snatched the ad. "Okay, let me read it out loud. Wanted. A tall well-built woman with good reputation, who can cook frog legs, who appreciates a good fuchsia garden, classical music and talking without getting too serious... I mean, that's funny, Ruby. I even wrote all ages are welcome."

"Yeah, but you misspelled fuchsia."

"I didn't write that part, I just found it online," Caitlin said with a groan. "But that can't be it... can it? Naw, the girls I've seen looking at it couldn't spell fuchsia either! I mean... sheesh. Is it so hard to get that they should only read the first, third and fifth lines? I guess it must be."

"The first, third and fifth lines...?" Ruby said with a puzzled look on her face. "Gimme, I gotta read it again," she continued and reached for the ad.

As Caitlin took another sip of her drink, she studied the bartender's face that went from puzzled to enlightened to annoyed in the space of as many seconds.

"Ha. Ha. Ha," Ruby said drolly as she handed the ad to Caitlin. "Not funny, Caitlin. Not funny at all."

"But..."

"Don't put it back up," Ruby said and walked further up the counter to tend to a new customer.

Pouting wildly, Caitlin crumpled the ad into a tiny ball of paper. "What's wrong with everybody tonight... it was funny..." she mumbled under her breath as she turned around to get back to her neverending quest of finding exquisite female company.

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On the dance floor, several couples were grinning and looking at Debbie and Samantha who were dancing so closely that their bodies touched all the way down.

Dancing with her eyes fixated on Samantha's pale brown orbs in front of her, her hands on her back and their lips in close proximity, Debbie was floating away on a cloud of bliss. She could hardly hear the music anymore, but since she had Samantha in her arms, it didn't matter one iota.

"Debbie?" Samantha whispered directly into Debbie's ear to be heard over the music.

"Yeah?"

"I... uh..." Samantha said but seemed to lose her courage. A few heartbeats went by in complete silence, but then she drew a deep breath. "Would you like to go home with me tonight?" she whispered; her warm breath tickling Debbie's ear.

It took exactly one and a half heartbeats for Debbie to make up her mind. "Yes," she whispered back, leaning in to kiss Samantha tenderly on the cheek.

Samantha laughed nervously and responded to the kiss by fidgeting with Debbie's belt. "God... I... I know I'm not sexy like some here-"

Debbie shook her head and put a finger across Samantha's lips. "I want it, you want it... we're both adults, Samantha. The rest doesn't matter a damn thing," she whispered.

"Thank you," Samantha said and stopped dancing. "When do you-"

"Thought you'd never ask," Debbie said decisively, took Samantha by the hand and led her off the dance floor.

They quickly went down the aisle to get to the hallstand at the main entrance for their coats, once again blowing past Caitlin who had been abandoned for the umpteenth time of the evening.

"Hey...!" Caitlin said and jumped off the bar stool. "You're in an almighty hurry... where's the fire?"

Samantha donned a very nice winter jacket and put her hand on the doorknob. "I'm just gonna go outside and call a cab, Debbie," she said, finding her cell in her pocket.

"Okay. I'll be right there," Debbie said, waving her hand. When the door closed behind Samantha, Debbie turned back to Caitlin with the broadest shit-eating grin imaginable plastered on her face.

Caitlin blinked a few times and rubbed her eyes. "Whoa... I know that look... and now I definitely know where the fire's at, too... okay, who are you and what have you done with my best friend?" she said in an accusing tone.

"Ha, ha. Your best friend is safe and well and about to go home with a gorgeous gal... isn't that what you wanted for me? By the way, where's your Valentine?"

"Ah, she split... again... enough about me. Jesus, Debbie... go for it, honey!" Caitlin said and yanked Debbie into a suffocating crush.

"Yikes! Thanks, Caitlin," Debbie said as she threw her arms down the sleeves of her coat to get it on as quickly as possible. "You're not upset you have to drive home alone, then?"

Grinning from ear to ear, Caitlin adjusted her sunglasses and puffed out her chest in a rare - and slightly fake - display of bluster and bravado. "Alone? A-lone?! Ha! Caitlin O'Herlihy is never alone!"

Chuckling, Debbie tied the belt on her coat and fluffed her hair out of her collar. "Right... whatever you say. Anyway, I had a blast tonight. Thanks for the invitation and the ride over here, Caitlin... I'll call you tomorrow. See you later!"

"Alligator!" Caitlin said and slapped Debbie's butt as she turned around to go to the door.

When the door slid shut, curiosity got the better of Caitlin and she hurried over to the windows to look out at the parking lot. Debbie and Samantha were engaged in a sizzling kiss right in the middle of the sidewalk, and Caitlin had to rub her eyes again at the improbable sight. Then the Taurus Cab they had called for arrived and whisked them away into the night.

"Wow..." Caitlin said as she shuffled away from the windows. "Debbie gets to step four just like that... with the first girl she meets... and I can't get past step two with anybody... wow. Incredible."

Sighing deeply, she shuffled over to the nearest bar stool and sat down with a bump. Once she had ordered yet another new Club Twister, she took off her sunglasses and began to pout into her soda.

Twenty minutes later, a shadow fell over Caitlin who was still pouting into her drink.

"Is this seat taken?" a female voice said right next to her.

Grinning, Caitlin put her sunglasses back on and turned her head to check out the lady she just knew would be a babe - but came to a dead halt when she realized it was Francine, the inebriated woman she'd had a close encounter with on the dance floor; now, the red-eyed Frankie appeared slightly less drunk and looked like she really needed someone to talk to.

Caitlin studied the woman with the tanned skin, the open black shirt and the tight jeans, and weighed the pros and cons for a few seconds - the pros included the fact that she was fairly easy on the eyes, even in her inebriated state, and that the nights they had spent together had been okay; the biggest con was that she had a history of being difficult to get rid of afterwards.

Shrugging, Caitlin patted the seat next to her. "Nah, Frankie. Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you anything?"

"No thanks, Caitlin. I've had enough for tonight."

"Oh? Well... in that case," Caitlin said and checked that she still had her car keys in her pocket, "how about we went for a little drive... say, back to my place?"

Francine slid around on the bar stool and shot Caitlin a lusty, bleary-eyed look that faded away into nothing almost immediately. "Can't."

"Awww, why not?" Caitlin said and took a swig of her Club Twister.

"I'm married now. I'm on a Valentine's date with my wife... she's back there waiting for me," Francine said and pointed over her shoulder.

Inevitably, Caitlin choked hard on her soda and she had to cough several times to get every little droplet out of her windpipe. "Aw swell... figures," she croaked as she wiped her lips and chin clear of excess Club Twister. "Jesus, I'm outta luck tonight," she mumbled under her breath, shaking her head despondently.

Turning back around, she sighed deeply and raised her sunglasses to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Man, I hope Debbie has better luck with her own Valentine. Hell, she can't have worse luck! This Valentine's Day stinks!"

At the same time in an apartment seven blocks away, a line of clothing items - a winter coat, two pairs of shoes, a pair of blue jeans, a white, pleated dress, a tan button-down shirt, a white undershirt, two bras and finally two pairs of panties - stretched from the front door to the bedroom door.

The joyful, heated sounds of passion that came from the other side of the closed door proved that Debbie was indeed having better luck with her Valentine - much, much better luck...

THE END

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