



# **MOST OF ALL YOU**

**A LOVE STORY**

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

**MIA SHERIDAN**

ALSO BY MIA SHERIDAN

*Archer's Voice*

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*This book is dedicated to Danita,  
who has her own angel Gabriel.*

*And to those everywhere who have  
been given up on.*

# PROLOGUE

## ELLIE

I didn't want to go. "Please, Mama, can we go tomorrow?"

My mama didn't answer for a minute, pushing her blonde hair away from her face and wiping at the sweat that dotted her forehead and upper lip. Her cheeks were bright red with fever again, and her green eyes looked dull and shiny at the same time, like the surface of the puddles in the parking lot at our apartment complex after it rained. "We have to go, Ellie. I feel well enough today, and I don't know if I will tomorrow."

Mama didn't look like she felt well. She looked worse than I'd seen her in weeks. Even worse than the day she'd found the paper stuck to our door and cried and then got back into bed for three days. It scared me how sick she looked, and I didn't know what to do.

I used to knock on Mrs. Hollyfield's door and ask for help when she still lived in our building. She would come over with chicken soup and sometimes a box of Popsicles, and she'd talk to my mama in a quiet, soothing voice while I watched cartoons. I always felt better after Mrs. Hollyfield left, and it seemed like Mama did, too. But Mrs. Hollyfield didn't live at our apartment complex anymore. Something called a blood clot had happened to Mrs. Hollyfield, and they took her away on a white stretcher.

After that, some younger people who I'd never seen before came and cleaned her apartment out. When I heard them arguing about who was going to pay her funeral costs, I knew she was dead. My mama cried and cried and kept saying, "What am I gonna do now? Oh, Lord God, what am I gonna do now?" But I didn't cry, even though I wanted to, because once, when my mama was at the doctor's, Mrs. Hollyfield told me that when you die, you fly away to heaven just like a bird. She said that heaven is the most

glorious place any person could ever imagine, with gold-paved streets and flowers in colors that didn't even exist here on earth. So I tried to be happy for Mrs. Hollyfield even though I was going to miss her hugs, her laughter, the red Popsicles that were my favorite, and the way she made my mama smile.

"Pick up your feet, Ellie. I can't drag you." I walked quicker, trying to keep up with Mama. She was walking fast, and I almost had to run to stay at her side. "We're getting close to your daddy's house."

I swallowed heavily, a dizzy feeling in my head. I wasn't sure if I wanted to meet my daddy or not, but I was curious. I wondered what he looked like—if he was handsome like the soap opera actors Mama watched. She seemed to like them a whole lot, so I knew that was the sort of man she would have picked to be my daddy. I pictured him in a suit with thick, wavy hair and big straight teeth. I hoped he would think *I* was pretty despite my ragged clothes. I hoped he would like me even though he'd left us before I was even born.

We got to a small house with peeling paint and a shutter that was hanging crooked, and when my mama stopped in front of it, she squeezed my hand. "Lord, please give me strength. I have no choice, I have no choice," my mama murmured before she turned and kneeled down in front of me. "Here we are, baby." Her eyes were watery, her lips were shaking, and I was alarmed at how sick she looked. But she smiled so sweetly and looked right in my eyes. "Ellie, sweetness, you know I love you, right?"

"Yes, Mama."

She nodded. "I didn't do a lot of good in this world, baby. But one thing I did perfectly was *you*. You're such a good, smart girl, Ellie. You don't forget that, okay? No matter what, you don't forget that."

"Okay, Mama," I whispered. I felt even more scared, and I didn't know why. My mama stood and then adjusted my sweater with the missing buttons and unraveling hem. She frowned at my shoes, her eyes staying on the hole in my toe for a few more seconds before she straightened up, taking my hand and leading me toward the door of the ugly little house.

Mama knocked, and I heard a man shouting on the other side of the door. He sounded angry, and his voice scared me. I pressed myself into my mama's side. She put her arm around me and we waited. Mama felt so hot, and now her whole body was shaking. She leaned into me, and I worried we both might topple over. I knew she needed a doctor, but she'd stopped



going to the doctor months ago even though she didn't seem to be getting any better. Weren't doctors supposed to make you better?

After a minute, the door opened, and a tall man stood in front of us with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. My mama gasped. I peeked up at him, and he stared down at my mama and me. "Yeah?"

My mama ran her hand over my hair. "Hi, Brad."

The man was quiet as he sucked on his cigarette, and then his eyes widened and he finally said, "Cynthia?"

I felt my mama relax, and I looked up at her. She had a big smile on her face. The one she used when she was trying to convince Mrs. Gadero to let us pay our rent late. I took another peek at Brad, *my daddy*. He was tall like the soap opera actors, but that was the only thing they had in common. His hair was long and sorta greasy looking, and his teeth were yellow and crooked. But we had the same blue eyes and the same color hair—golden brown, my mama called it.

"Well, I'll be damned. What are you doing here?"

"May we come in?"

We went into the house, and I looked around at the old furniture, no better than the furniture Mama and I had at home. I heard my mama take a deep breath. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Brad squinted his eyes and looked back and forth between my mama and me before he said, "Sure, come on in the bedroom."

"El, you sit on the couch, sweetness. I'll be right back," my mama said, seeming to weave slightly before she caught herself. The red spots on her cheeks were even brighter.

I sat down and stared at the TV in front of me. There was a football game on but the sound was muted, so I could hear my mama and daddy talking from down the hall.

"She's yours, Brad."

"What the fuck do you mean she's *mine*? You told me you got an abortion."

"Well, I ... I didn't. I couldn't. I knew you didn't want her, but I couldn't get rid of my baby."

I heard my daddy swear, and a big lump formed in my throat. My daddy hadn't wanted me. At all. He hadn't even known my mama kept me until just now. He hadn't even known I was alive. My mama hadn't told me different, but in my mind, I kept hoping there was a good reason my daddy

had left. I kept hoping that when he saw me, he'd take me in his arms and tell me everything was going to be okay, and that he was proud to have me for a daughter. *Like my mama says to me all the time.* And then he'd find a doctor who could make my mama better.

"She's a really good girl, Brad. You see how beautiful she is. And she's smart, too. She's real sweet and well behaved—"

"What do you want, Cynthia? Money? I don't got no money. I got nothin' for you."

"I don't want money. I need you to take her. I'm ... I'm dying, Brad." Her voice lowered so I almost couldn't hear it. "I have stage four cancer. I have such little time—weeks, maybe just days. We've been evicted from our apartment. I thought a neighbor would take Ellie ... but she's gone, and I don't have anyone else. You're all Ellie has in this world now." My heart tightened inside my chest, and as the room spun around me, a tear ran down my cheek. *No, Mama, no.* I didn't want to hear this. I didn't want this to be true. I didn't want my mama to fly to heaven like a bird. *I want her to stay here. With me.*

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that but take her? Goddamn, I didn't want her seven years ago, and I don't want her now." I grimaced, picking at the skin around my fingernail, feeling small and ugly just like the scrawny cat Mama never let me feed.

"Please, Brad, I—" I heard shuffling and the squeak of a bed as if my mama had sat down. She asked for a glass of water, and my daddy came out of the room looking mad. He shot me an angry look, and I sunk down into the couch. I thought I heard a door open and close at the back of the house, but I wasn't sure, and then my daddy came out of what must be the kitchen with a glass of water in his hand and went back down the hall.

I heard him swear. I heard him calling my mama's name, and then he came rushing out to the living room and threw the water at the wall, the glass shattering. I screamed and curled into a ball.

"Well, isn't that a fine thing? That slut just up and left. Snuck out the back door. *Bitch.*"

I blinked, my heart racing. *Mama? No, Mama, don't leave me here! Please don't leave me here!*

I jumped up and ran down the hall where I found a back door, throwing it open and rushing out into the alley behind the house. There was no one in sight.

My mama was gone.  
She hadn't even said goodbye.  
*She hadn't even said goodbye.*  
She'd left me here.  
I fell to my knees on the ground and sobbed.  
*Mama, Mama, Mama.*

Brad picked me up, and the harsh sting of a slap across my face made me gag on my own tears. "Shut up, kid. Your mama's gone." He dragged me back inside, where he threw me on the couch again. I clenched my eyes shut, fear racing through my body like the little needle pricks I felt when I'd been sitting on my foot for too long. When I opened my eyes, Brad was staring at me. The look on his face scared me even more. He made a disgusted sound in his throat and then turned away and left for what felt like hours. I stayed curled up on the couch, rocking myself slowly, as the day turned to night.

*Mama never leaves me for this long. I'm always a good girl and do what I'm told, but she never stays away so long. I don't like the smells here. I don't like the sound of the dripping water. I don't like this scratchy couch. I'm scared. I'm scared. Mama, please come back and get me.*

When Brad finally returned, flicking on the lights and causing me to squint into the sudden brightness, he looked even more mad than before he'd left. He sat down and lit a cigarette and sucked in a puff of it before blowing the smoke out, causing my eyes to water. "What am I gonna do with you, kid? Just what the fuck am I gonna do?"

I looked away, tried to swallow back the sob that wanted to escape.

Mrs. Hollyfield told me that hearts are meant to beat all the time to keep us alive. Mrs. Hollyfield said that when your heart stops beating and you go to heaven, you don't feel pain anymore. Mrs. Hollyfield's heart had stopped beating. *My mama's heart is going to stop beating, too.* My heart was still beating, even though it felt like it was crumbling in my chest. I didn't want to hurt anymore. I wanted my heart to stop beating so I could fly to heaven and be with Mrs. Hollyfield. *And Mama.*

I told my heart to stop beating.

I told it not to hurt anymore.

I told my heart I wouldn't *let* it hurt anymore.

Ever.

# CHAPTER ONE

Come with me, I'll help you. It looks like you need a friend.

*Racer, the Knight of Sparrows*

## CRYSTAL

### *Present Day*

He didn't belong here. Why that thought came immediately to my mind the moment I laid eyes on him, I couldn't be sure. But it did. It wasn't the way he looked—I'd seen handsome, clean-cut, seemingly wholesome boys here before. Get a few drops of alcohol in them, or a few whiffs of the pack mentality wafting thickly in the air, and they'd be acting just like the other drunken fools eager to part with their money and any common decency they might possess. And it wasn't that he was out of place because he looked scared. I'd seen that before, too—eyes darting around, nervous and excited by the surroundings. No, the man sitting alone at a table near the back of the room, nursing a Miller Lite, didn't look scared, merely curious. His head turned slowly as he took in the room at large, and I couldn't help that my gaze followed his, wondering at his assessment.

My own curiosity confused and disturbed me. It was so unlike me to wonder about any of the men who came here, and I couldn't find an explanation. I closed my eyes, pushing the thoughts away as the loud music filled my head. When my performance ended, the applause exploded and I plastered a smile on my face.

Anthony walked behind the crowd, making sure no one took liberties, pulling the ones who did away from me as they protested. Five minutes later, as I turned to leave, my eyes met those of the man in the back, still sitting at the same table, watching me. I straightened my spine, something

about his face niggling at my mind. I knew I hadn't seen him here before. Did I know him? Is *that* what kept drawing my attention?

Once I was backstage, I pulled the cash out of my underwear, uncrumpling the bills until I could fold it all into a thick wad.

"Nice job, honey," Cherry said as she drew closer to me, headed toward the stage.

"Thanks." I smiled, squeezing her arm gently as we passed each other.

I unlocked my locker in the hall and stuffed the tip money into my purse before heading to the dressing room I shared with two other girls. They were off tonight, so for once I had the too-crowded space to myself. I sunk down in the chair in front of the small vanity table littered with cases, tubes, and compacts of makeup, jars of cold cream, and bottles of lotion and perfume. In the quiet of the room, the sounds of the men in the audience who'd just watched me dance filled my head—the whoops, hollers, and the catcalls that described in lurid detail what they wanted to do to me. I could still smell the scents of the beer-laden breath, heavy cologne, and body odor that had overwhelmed me as I'd bent and shimmied toward all those masculine shouts and reaching hands.

For a moment I fantasized using my arm to swipe everything on the surface in front of me to the floor and watch as it shattered and spilled, mixing together in a mess of gloppy, powdery color, and scent. Shaking my head, I stared at myself in the mirror, overcome by a sudden urge to grab a towel and begin scrubbing and smearing the makeup caked on my face. *God, what's wrong with me?* A lump filled my throat and I stood too quickly, the chair I'd been sitting in tipping backward and clattering to the floor.

"Crystal?"

I turned at the sound of Anthony's voice, and whatever was on my face caused him to frown. "You all right, girl?"

I nodded, a jerky up-and-down motion of my head. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just thirsty." I walked toward the water cooler, picking up a Dixie cup, filling and draining it quickly before looking back at Anthony. "What's up?"

"You got two private dance requests."

I filled the Dixie cup again and took a sip. "Okay."

"Little extra money's never bad, yeah?" One side of his lips tipped up.

"Never bad," I murmured.

Anthony remained unmoving, his lips a straight line again as he studied me solemnly. “I could tell ’em you’re sick.”

*I am. I am sick. Sick of this. Sick of life.* I shook my head, attempting to shake off the morose thoughts that had pricked my brain. “No, just give me a minute and I’ll be out.”

Anthony inclined his head and shut the door behind him. I took a deep breath and moved back to the vanity, bending toward it and using my finger to fix the places where my makeup had smeared. I stood straight and offered the mirror a smirk. “Showtime,” I whispered before turning, opening the door, and walking down the hall, where a skinny guy with shaggy, dark blond hair and a long face waited. He jerked as I approached, pulling himself ramrod straight, his large Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. Bile rose in mine. I gave him a sultry smile. “Hiya, sugar. You ready for me?”

\* \* \*

It was getting close to closing time when I performed my last dance and made my way back to the dressing room again, stretching my neck from side to side and sighing with both relief and fatigue. When we girls weren’t dancing, whether onstage or behind closed doors, we served drinks. The manager, Rodney, liked our presence out on the floor—liked that bending over tables to deliver drinks and brushing past the men we were serving excited and encouraged them to keep spending money. Dealing with an obnoxious group of them, made bold by the stares of their friends, was nauseating. Tedious. But it also roused their *generosity* when I was onstage, so I did what I had to do. A subtle wink around the table and each idiot thought my next dance was just for him.

I changed quickly into my uniform—tiny white shorts, a black-and-white-striped shirt that tied between my boobs, and red stiletto heels—and opened the door to do a few last rounds of the bar floor. I startled, as did the man standing outside, leaning against the opposite hallway wall. *What the hell?* Where was Anthony? My eyes darted down the empty hall, no Anthony in sight. The man—he was the one I’d wondered about earlier—stood tall and ran a hand through his brown hair, looking momentarily unsure.

“You’re not supposed to be back here,” I said, crossing my arms over my breasts, unsure why I was attempting to cover what he’d probably been gawking at earlier.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure of the protocol.”

I raised a brow. “Protocol?”

He shook his head slightly. “The, ah, procedure for meeting with you.”

I cocked my head to the side. Okay, this guy was potentially crazy. “The *procedure* is that you have to go through Anthony. Big black guy? Mean looking? Snaps men in half if they mess with one of his girls.” My eyes darted down the hallway again.

“Ah. Yeah, he’s breaking up a fight outside.”

I glanced back to him. “Uh-huh. And so you made your move?” I took one step back into the room, ready to barricade myself inside if he tried anything.

He blinked and paused for a second before reaching into his coat pocket. Bringing his hand out, he tossed something my way. Instinct made me reach out and catch it. A set of keys. I looked at him, creasing my brow in confusion.

“If I do anything to make you nervous, you can gouge my eyes out with one of those.”

“Gouge your eyes out? Yeah, I’d really rather not.”

“I won’t give you reason to. I don’t mean you any harm.”

Anthony appeared at the end of the hallway, shaking his hand as if he’d injured it. “Yo, you’re not supposed to be back here.” *Oh, thank God.*

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t know the rules.”

“Ignorance is no excuse, my man. Gotta eighty-six your ass. You okay, Crys?” I nodded.

“I only want ten minutes,” the man said quickly, raising his hands. I wasn’t sure if he was doing an *I’m unarmed* gesture or whether his ten fingers went in tandem with the promise of limited time.

“Sorry, my lap-dance card is full for the night, sugar.”

“I don’t want a lap dance. I just want to talk.”

Ah, one of *those*. I almost rolled my eyes. But something inside made me pause. I couldn’t say what it was. He was handsome, sure. Pretty, even, with that thick brown hair curling up at his collar and classic masculine bone structure. But I’d known a few handsome men in my time. Each one had a mean streak three miles wide. Handsome got you a big fat nowhere in the

end. In fact, sometimes worse off. In my experience, the handsome ones thought they were God's gift to womankind, and that it was their moral duty to spread themselves far and wide.

No, it was something other than that. It was his eyes. His eyes held some sort of innocence I hadn't seen before. Gentleness I certainly wasn't used to. His expression was hopeful, but not desperate, and I didn't detect lust in his eyes. He looked ... sincere. Maybe he really did just want to talk. "It's okay, Anthony."

Anthony lowered the hand that had been about to clamp down on the man's arm and stepped back. "You sure?"

"Yeah." I looked at the man. "Ten minutes." I held the keys up, one stuck through my fingers. "And don't make me use these. I don't want to but if you force the issue, you'll exit this room blind, sugar."

"Gabriel," he said, a small smile lighting his face. "My name is Gabriel." Like the angel? No wonder I'd thought he didn't belong here.

"All right." I stood aside, and he moved past me into the room. I nodded once at Anthony and then pushed the door so it still stood halfway open. I knew Anthony would stay close by.

"So what brings a nice guy like you to this den of sin, sugar?"

"Gabriel. And you're Crystal?"

"Around here I am."

He looked at me steadily, and it was disconcerting. After a moment he nodded as if he understood something I didn't. "I see."

At his words, his knowing look, a small burst of flustered anger ricocheted through my belly like the ball in a pinball machine. I smiled suggestively and took a seat on the small, dirty gold settee, reclining, and then crossing my legs. I used my hands to play idly with the knotted material between my breasts. I watched his eyes follow my movement and flare slightly before he looked away. Ah, there it was—lust. Just like every other man. *Familiar*. I took a breath, satisfaction and calm moving through me. "So what is it you want to talk about?"

He cleared his throat and put his hands in his pockets, tilting his head slightly so his hair fell across his forehead. His posture, the way he squinted slightly as he looked at me, triggered my memory, and I suddenly realized how I knew him. *Lost boy*. The words moved through my mind as if someone had scribbled them there. His name was Gabriel Dalton, and he'd gone missing when he was a kid. It was a big-time national news story



when he escaped his kidnapper and came home. I was only a pre-teen at the time, but I'd still heard about it here and there. Of course, right about the time Gabriel had come home, my world was—yet again—falling apart.

The last time I saw his picture on the news had been a while ago, but I knew for certain who he was now. “You shouldn't be in a place like this. If someone recognizes you, I imagine they'll be real eager to take your picture.”

He froze for a portion of a second before relaxing again. He took a seat in the metal chair across from where I sat and looked at me expectantly, like one of the men waiting for a lap dance. Only ... different somehow. I wished I could pinpoint what it was that looked so wrong about him sitting there. Maybe it was that he looked *nice*. And I couldn't ever remember thinking that about anyone who walked through the door of this club. He blew a breath out slowly and ran a hand through his hair, moving it off his forehead. “I guess it's good you recognized me. Might make this a little easier.” He seemed to be talking more to himself and so I didn't respond. He looked straight at me. “I probably should have thought this out a little more instead of just showing up.” He rubbed his palms on his thighs as if his hands were sweating.

“Are you going to get to what you want, or am I supposed to guess?”

He shook his head. “No, no, I'm sorry. I don't want to waste your time.” He paused again. “The thing is, Crys—” He cleared his throat. “The thing is, because of my history, which it sounds like you know a little bit about, I, uh, find it difficult to tolerate ... closeness.” Two pink spots appeared on his cheekbones. Was he *blushing*? God, I didn't even know men *could* blush. As if my opinion of him mattered somehow. Something small and warm moved through me, something I had little idea how to identify.

“Closeness?” I frowned, uncomfortable with the softness in my tone.

He pressed his lips together, the color in his cheeks increasing. “I find it difficult to get physically close to people. Or rather, I find it emotionally distressing. Uh ...” He laughed softly, an embarrassed sound. “God, this didn't sound so pitiful in my head.” He looked somewhere behind me. “Or maybe it did. Maybe it's just worse hearing it out loud.”

“What is it I can do for you exactly, sugar?” My voice still sounded soft. Helplessly, my heart squeezed, and I felt a shiver of compassion run through me for the way Gabriel was struggling in front of me. The unfamiliar emotion unbalanced me, and I drew myself up straighter.

“Gabriel,” he corrected.

“Okay, what is it I can do for you, *Gabe*?” He didn’t smile with his mouth, but his eyes squinted slightly as if he was. But then the lines around his eyes smoothed out, and I wondered if that had been a *sort of* smile, or just my imagination.

“You can help me practice being touched by a woman. Getting comfortable with someone in my personal space.”

I blinked at him as he looked down at his hands in his lap. “You want *me* to help you with that?”

His gaze met mine and I saw that gentleness there again—hope—and something about that expression aimed right at me made me feel good and ... needed. For the bare glimmer of a moment, it made me feel as if he saw *more* in me than just the piece of ass all the other men who came to this club viewed me as.

“I’ll pay you, obviously. It would be an after-hours job, nothing more. You wouldn’t even have to take your clothes off.”

*You wouldn’t even have to take your clothes off.*

His words brought me up cold, snapping me back to reality, reminding me that he saw me *exactly* as other men did, in fact exactly as I *was*. With my defenses firmly back in place, I stood, picking up the keys next to me on the settee, tossing them his way. He caught them with one hand. “Listen, as much as I hate to turn down a paying gig, I’m no therapist, okay? You want to learn how to touch someone, get a girlfriend. You’re a good-looking guy. I’m sure there are plenty of sweet, wholesome girls who wouldn’t mind you practicing on them for free.”

He stood, too. “I’ve insulted you.”

I laughed. “Sugar, I can’t be insulted.”

“Everyone can be insulted.” Regret laced his tone. He put his hands in his pockets and tilted his head in that way of his, his hair falling over his forehead again. My fingers twitched to smooth it away from his eyes. *What is wrong with me?*

I felt my skin prickling with unease. Everything about Gabriel made me feel uneasy. I needed him to leave. “You don’t know me, Gabe. Thanks for the job offer, but I’m going to decline. I do wish you luck with your little problem. Ten minutes is up.”

He sighed, not moving. “I really am sorry. God, this didn’t go the way I meant it to.”

“I’m sure it didn’t.” I held the door open.

Outside, Anthony was sitting in a chair, wrapping a bandage around his injured hand. “Things kosher?”

I nodded jerkily as Gabriel moved past me. He stopped when he crossed the threshold and turned back to me. “I really am sorry,” he said.

I crossed my arms over my chest, my eyes meeting his. Standing this close, I could see that his eyes were hazel with striations of copper. His lashes were thick and lush, curled up slightly—lashes any girl would kill for.

I took a small step back, putting even more distance between us, and blew out a breath. “It’s fine. Really. Good luck again.”

He started to turn away but then looked back. “Can I just ask one more question?”

I moved from one leg to the other. “Sure.”

“What were you thinking when you looked at me from the stage? When our eyes met.”

I frowned slightly, about to deny I’d been thinking anything at all but deciding it didn’t matter at that point. I’d never see him again. “I was thinking you didn’t belong here.” And I’d been right.

He paused, his expression enigmatic as his eyes moved over my face. “Huh. Funny,” he finally murmured. “I was thinking the very same thing about you.”

I laughed, a short huff of sound. “Well, you were wrong there. This is the one place I *do* belong, sugar.”

“Gabriel.” His lips tipped up slightly, his eyes lingering on me for a heartbeat too long, before he turned and walked away.

## CHAPTER TWO

Focus on the good things, even when they're simple. Then bury them deep so only you know where they are.

*Shadow, the Baron of Wishbone*

### GABRIEL

I'd fucked that up royally. *You can help me practice being touched by a woman.* For the love of Christ. No wonder she'd told me to leave. I'd sounded like some sort of psychopath. I shifted into park, turned my truck off, and waited in my driveway for a minute. What the hell had I been thinking? Not only had I messed things up, and presented myself as completely pathetic, I'd insulted her.

*Crystal.*

What was her real name? I wondered who she was, wondered why my heart had begun to beat insistently against my chest—as if trying to get my attention—when she'd stepped onto that stage, that distant, removed look on her beautiful face. *As if she were made of stone.* And yet her body moved so fluidly, so gracefully. She fascinated me. I hadn't gone there for anything more than to find a woman who might be willing to take on a small side job far less “hands on”—*so to speak*—than what was procured in the back rooms of a place like the Platinum Pearl. But *she* had intrigued me, caught my attention, and hadn't let go. Something about her ... called to me. Something that had nothing at all to do with her skimpy outfit or overt sexuality. Something that had nothing to do with the reason I was there in the first place. I let out a small, humorless chuckle that turned into a groan as I raked my hands through my hair.

I couldn't deny I was attracted to her, but even I wasn't stupid or inexperienced enough to think developing a crush on a stripper would be a