

# THE FIERY BOYS

(a free preview of the first twenty-two chapters)

## Sage Ardman

Fame series #1

R.L. Ranch Press

Portola Valley, California

## **Books by Sage Ardman**



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## The Fiery Boys

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For more information, please contact: R.L. Ranch Press, 4119 Alpine Road, Suite A, Portola Valley, California, 94028. Telephone: 650-851-2927. Or visit rlranchpress.com.

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**Warning:** This is an erotic story and should not be read to little children before bedtime.

This free preview consists of the first twenty-two chapters (almost one half) of my book, *The Fiery Boys*, published in July, 2016 by R.L. Ranch Press, a division of RuLabinsky Enterprises.

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Diogo Landô did a great job on the cover art.

Finally, thanks go to the Fiery Boys for writing some memorable tunes. Those of you who were around back when the band was hot will surely remember their hit single, "Fiery Life." If you missed it and can't find it on any of the oldies channels, you can still find the song on this book's website: sageardman.com/FieryBoys.html. Thanks go to Gregory Jones for sending me a copy of this wonderful old song.

## **Table of Contents**



One	2
Two	13
Three	18
Four	26
Five	35
Six	41
Seven	49
Eight	54
Nine	61
Ten	69
Eleven	79
Twelve	87
Thirteen	95
Fourteen	103
Fifteen	109
Sixteen	114
Seventeen	119
Eighteen	124
Nineteen	131
Twenty	142
Twenty-One	148
Twenty-Two	154
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Chapters 23-49 are not part of this preview

## **Fiery Life**

by Fiery Boys



The engine's rumble, the speed, The drive to break out, the need, The push to prove it, your creed.

Living by a precipice,
Dancing on the blade of a knife,
Liberty means so much more,
The promise, the promise of a fiery life.

The winding road draws your prowls, It grabs for your heart, and growls, With blood on its bed, it howls.

Living by a precipice,
Dancing on the blade of a knife,
Liberty means so much more,
The sorrow, the sorrow of a fiery life.

Honor the fallen with depth, Live and remember each death, Burn the life bright with new breath.

Living by a precipice,
Dancing on the blade of a knife,
Liberty means so much more,
You owe it, you owe yourself a fiery life.

## The Fiery Boys



## One



I never found out what happened on Kira's tragic date last night. We were about to hear the grisly details when she stopped, mid-sentence, staring across the room at the television over the bar. Jo and I traded looks of confusion as we waited for her to go on, but Kira was elsewhere. As she sat there, transfixed, her face lit up, brighter and brighter.

I turned to look at the television behind me, but it was just the same basketball game that the other screens were showing. I looked all around the bar, trying to figure out what would explain this sudden delay of gossip. Then I turned back to Kira and examined her more closely. I wondered if I'd find a tranquilizer dart sticking out of her neck, or rays of light streaming down from an alien spaceship. Anything that could explain why last night's dismal date was now forgotten. To paraphrase the announcers at the end of Elvis's concerts, Kira had left the building.

Jo waved a hand in front of our friend's blank eyes. "Hello! What's going on?"

That snapped her out of it, and she turned to us with a hard gasp. "Oh my God! This is too good to be true." She yanked out her phone and started to work it like a video game. This only made her more excited. Did Kira just win the lottery? Maybe she'd just been awarded a Nobel prize.

Whatever this was, Kira was definitely taking it seriously. You'd think her world had just been turned upside down. She tapped her phone one last time and

looked up. "You're not going to believe this. Guess which band is back and making a reunion tour? They're playing here at the end of June!" She sucked in her breath and jumped a little.

I started to work on her riddle but was impeded by two and a half pints of beer. What can I say? It was a Thursday, girls' night out. And we'd been at it for a while. Also, I hadn't been paying complete attention up to that point because, honestly, this had started off as just another one of Kira's breakup stories, and I'd heard them all since, well, forever. So I had to recalibrate my brain to focus on whatever it was that Kira was now talking about.

Neither Jo nor I actually had a chance to answer Kira's question—she was way too excited to let anyone guess. She waited a tenth of a second, then blurted out the band's name, loud and fast like a popped balloon.

"Fiery Boys!"

Whoa, had I just heard her right? I sat up straight, knocked my hand against my beer glass, then miraculously caught it before anything spilled. See? I can hold my liquor.

But between the close call with my beer and the thought of seeing the Fiery Boys in concert again, half my buzz was gone. I was on high alert. I swear, they're my favorite band

Now I knew what most people thought about the Fiery Boys. Just a manufactured band of sixteen-year-olds who burst onto the scene ten years ago, hit the top of the charts for a while, then slipped off into obscurity. And all that was true.

But if you'd gone to high school with Kira and me, you'd know how incredible that band once was. These weren't some mellow kids harmonizing in squeaky prepubescent voices. The Fiery Boys were hard rockers, with a lead singer

#### 4 Sage Ardman

who howled like an angry lion. Their drummer was probably the most gorgeous man on planet Earth. In fact, all of them were pretty hot—they'd been selected for their appeal as well as their ability to rock. They were magnificent.

The Fiery Boys ruled during my last two years of high school. There wasn't a kid in my class that didn't love their pounding beat and intense lyrics. One of their theme songs, "Fiery Life," got me through some really tough times. So no matter what others might have said, I knew that the Fiery Boys were the most important band in the known universe.

Well, *my* known universe, anyway. And interestingly, the band broke up at the same time as my life did. Because of that, I never really had a chance to mourn them. Suddenly, I had more pressing issues to deal with. Besides, when you're dead, you're dead—and the Fiery Boys were dead. Or so I thought.

I hopped up and down and latched onto Kira's arm with both hands. "Really? The Fiery Boys are back? I'm in!" I turned to Jo. "Kira and I were totally in love with them."

Kira looked up from her phone, now much less manic but still far from calm. "Remember how we'd play their videos and dance all night?" She gave a nostalgic sigh. "Too bad they broke up so quickly. What was it? Two years, three albums, then they were done." She shook her head. "Not enough. I blame Danielle for breaking up the band. Buck really blew it when he married her."

I laughed. "You always liked Chuck best. But Buck was on my short list, along with River."

I had posters of River and Buck in my bedroom. The bigger poster was my absolute favorite Fiery Boy: River Sticks, the drummer. Shaved head and sexy as hell, his poster hung above my desk where I could see him when I

studied and at night from my bed. Anytime I needed a boost, all I had to do was take one look at his ripped body, deep dark eyes, and breathtakingly chiseled features. Pure animal energy seemed to shine from him, spilling out over his drum kit and right into my heart. When I was really in the zone, I could hear him grunt as he pounded those skins. God, how I wanted him.

My second favorite Fiery Boy was Buck Morris, the bass player. The one who Kira hated for marrying Danielle. Buck was classically handsome, with a sculpted face and straight black hair that draped over sapphire blue eyes. And talk about built! His body was ripped. I guess I wanted him, too.

Buck's poster was at the head of my bed, which had the disadvantage that I couldn't see him as well when I was lying there. In the poster, he was working the bass while giving the camera a lidded stare and the barest sliver of a smile. I used to wonder about that smile. Whereas the first thing I wanted to do to River was tear his clothes off, the first thing I wanted to do to Buck was ask him what he was smiling at. Then I'd tear his clothes off. Face it: he was seriously sexy, too.

Jo squinted at me. "River? Sorry. And Buck? Why bother when he had someone else? I'm with Kira on this one. Give me Chuck any day. When he howled into the microphone, I used to break out in a sweat." She nibbled at her lower lip for a few seconds of fantasy desire. "And what about Gabe? I could watch his fingers fly over that guitar for hours. I wonder if he's still the horny one." She grinned and wagged her evebrows.

Yeah, yeah. Chuck and Gabe, Chuck and Gabe. Everyone wanted Chuck and Gabe. And I had to agree that Chuck had some appeal. He was the tallest in the band, handsome, wiry, and muscular. When he sang and danced with his flirtatious smile, nobody looked away. And the way he growled on "Fiery Life" made me forget everything that was wrong with the world. For sure, I'd do him, too.

But Gabe... no. I couldn't deny that his guitar solos were things of beauty, but he simply didn't do it for me in the looks department. That's okay. I had three other guys to drool over.

I laid it all out for Jo. "Sorry, girl. You can have Gabe. And as far as Chuck goes, I guess I wouldn't kick him out of bed. Still, I'm sticking with my two favorites. Buck is pretty damn hot, and River. . ." I clutched my hands together and stared heavenward. "He's a god. So incredibly studly. I used to dream about marrying him."

I suddenly needed to see River again, eight years after the breakup. Was he still fabulously good looking? Did he still have a muscular build that I longed to have wrapped around me? I took out my phone and found a recent picture. Oh yes, my racing heart told me, I definitely needed to see this concert.

Kira kept working her phone and muttering encouraging words to urge it on, as if her exhortations would make it respond faster. I laid a hand on her arm. "Relax, girl." She flashed a smile then returned to her phone.

I scooted closer to look over her shoulder. "Are you getting tickets to the show?"

"You bet. I'm nearly there." She cocked her head toward Jo. "I assume you want a ticket. Want one for Larry?"

Jo rolled her eyes. "Sure, why not? Two tickets." I hadn't heard many good things about her latest boyfriend, but at least she had one. Kira rarely bothered with the notion. And although I currently had one, I knew he wouldn't last.

"You want a ticket for Palmer?" Kira asked, as though reading my mind.

Did I want a ticket for Palmer? I doubted it. I didn't even know if he liked the Fiery Boys. We'd only been together a half-dozen times over the past two months, so I didn't know much about him at all. If I had to guess, I'd say that his opinion of the Fiery Boys would be the same as his opinion of everything else: he'd be critical and dismissive. Yeah, he'd hate them. The more I thought about it, the more I knew I didn't want a ticket for Palmer.

Now Palmer wasn't a complete fail. He was good looking and decent in bed. But he was dull. Whereas I was always looking for new adventures, he was always looking for a steady routine. All my enthusiasm for life meant nothing to him.

Still, I understood Palmer's point of view. After working long hours as a plumber's assistant all week, the only thing he wanted to do on the weekend was stay home and watch videos. I couldn't blame him for being a homebody, but I wished he wasn't clingy and testy, too.

So although I wanted an extra ticket, I wasn't sure it would be for Palmer. But since this was a Fiery Boys concert, tickets would certainly be good to have. "Sure, get me two."

Kira grinned and returned to her phone. After a few final taps, she finished the purchase and smiled at the screen. "Yes!" she whooped as her arms punched the air. "We're gonna see the Fiery Boys!" She chanted it loudly in a sing-song voice.

Kira's little display of happiness got noticed all over the bar. Not that there was a man there who hadn't already noticed her. Long blonde hair, a great figure, and the face of a model, it didn't hurt that she wore black shorts and a white lace midriff-baring top over a black bra. Half the men

in the bar looked her way as soon as she walked in the door. Now the rest of them were staring, too.

One man at the next table raised his glass toward her. "I'll drink to that," he slurred. The others at his table laughed.

Ignoring them, Kira lowered her head and motioned us to lean in. She still had that manic glow on her face, and I could tell she had more news. I mean, look at her! She was actually shaking with excitement. I scooted closer to find out why.

"Here's the special part," Kira whispered. "The news ticker on the TV mentioned a contest. It said that the winner gets a week on the Fiery Boys tour bus. I looked it up —it's a real contest. All you need to do is send in a photo." She sat up straight and smiled, then spoke with cool confidence. "I'm going to win that contest."

I forced myself not to laugh at the absurdity of her statement. Kira often got grand ideas like this, and I understood why. After all, no man had ever refused her. They couldn't—probably some law of physical attraction. If Kira said she was going on tour with the Fiery Boys, it might actually happen.

I patted her arm. "Sure you are. And you're going to marry Chuck. You've been telling me that since high school."

"But I'm serious this time. Look." She held out her phone. "Here's the entry form where you submit your picture. See? Winner gets a week on tour with the band." She sat up straight and flashed a sultry smile. "That'll be me"

Jo, a psychologist, had been watching this interchange with what seemed like professional detachment. "Excuse me. . ." Her voice was serious, but her smirk warned us that things wouldn't stay that way. "Is there a casting couch to help them choose?"

Typical. Jo took the same approach to this contest that she did toward so many things: she made it be all about sex. And since she specialized in relationship counseling, she might well have been right. Jo had heard many strange things from her sexually challenged clients.

Kira ignored Jo's sarcasm and pointed to her phone. "It says here, 'We want to see what you look like, but we also want a picture that tells us something about you. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then make sure we can read some of them.' I've got great shots from when I was modeling. So my photo will tell them that this model can rock it with the Fiery Boys."

Jo and I snuck sympathetic looks at each other. We knew all about Kira's so-called modeling career, which had lasted for one entire photo session. The agency wasn't really looking for models. They just suckered naïve girls into paying for a photographer and some worthless lectures about the amazing life of a model. It never translated into any real work.

Now don't get me wrong—Kira was beautiful and could rock any outfit. But life doesn't always give you everything you want. I understood that by the time I was done with high school. Kira learned it a few months after that photo when modeling opportunities actually no materialized. To her credit, she moved on once she understood this. She found a job selling electronics and recently got promoted to be a branch manager. So even if she was delusional about this contest. Kira had real drive.

"Hey, you've got your beauty shots." Jo wagged a finger. "But what about Annalisa and me?" She flashed a sarcastic grin. "Looks like we have some work to do."

#### 10 Sage Ardman

I snorted. "As if we can compete with Kira." We all knew that if they were choosing based on a photo, then Kira would beat us easily. And to be honest, Jo would be number two. She might not be as classically stunning as Kira, but she had a short, slender body and a bob of red hair over a fairly pretty face. Tonight she was wearing a jean jacket, a frilly black miniskirt, and yellow leggings. No doubt about it, I'd be the last one they'd choose.

It's not like I'm a dog or anything. Honestly, I'd describe myself as "average." Average weight, not very thin but not too heavy, either. Average breasts, neither tiny nor busty. An average face, rather plain in my opinion, with what I always thought of as simple features. Even average length black hair, straight and hanging lifelessly. The only thing that was more than average was my height; at 5'10" tall, I had both Kira and Jo beat.

But I wasn't doing much with my height tonight. Unlike my girlfriends who were drawing looks from all over the bar, I'd dressed down in jeans and a light blue sweater. The outfit didn't garner much attention around here, especially sitting next to my girlfriends. But after dressing up all day at the car dealership, I preferred something casual for drinking night.

I might have seemed like a lonely woman who didn't dress up and whose only boyfriend options were boring, angry, and clingy losers. But I could do better if I wanted. I knew how to work what I had—I'd learned it from the Fiery Boys in high school. Back then, I would dance in my room while their music played in my ears and their posters watched over me. In my full-length mirror, I practiced moves I'd seen in videos, and I got pretty good. So I knew how to do all those things that make guys pay attention. And when I threw in my natural enthusiasm, I had

everything I needed to attract a man. Yeah, I could do better than Palmer, I just hadn't bothered lately.

Not since Zedediah Turner.

Zed, as everyone called him, was my first lover back in high school and still ranked as my best. He was also the only man I'd ever actually fallen in love with. We were magical during our two years together, and he was anything but boring. But then he died, a month before the Fiery Boys broke up, and the pain of lost love still stung.

One day I'd find a lover like Zed-I knew it would happen. Hey, maybe I'd win this contest and turn my charms on River Sticks. My mind wandered back to those youthful fantasies in which River and I shared a makebelieve life together. We were a great couple.

Okay, I admit it—I could be as delusional as Kira. My brain liked to take me on wild rides, thrilling me with spectacular outcomes or scaring me with horrifying possibilities. One little thought, and I'd be off to fantasyland. I couldn't help it; we all get that way some days.

But when I was done fantasizing, I knew that my chance of winning this contest was the same as Kira and Jo's. Zero. However, by this point in the evening, with my beer and adrenaline-fueled bloodstream fully operational, reality was irrelevant. I was definitely going to enter that contest. So what if I didn't win?

I grabbed my glass and got to my feet. "You're right. Let's take some pictures. Right here." The enthusiastic, tryanything-once part of me actually thought that this bar would be the perfect setting for my Fiery Boys spotlight.

Jo got up and started scouting for a good location. "We could pose over by the bar." She shot a playful smile. "No, wait! How about in the bathroom, posing by the sinks?"

#### 12 Sage Ardman

I could play that game. "Or in the toilet stall. That would be a winning shot." Even Kira laughed at that.

"Let's do this." Jo ran to the bar and laid back against it in a lusty pose, her arms stretched out past other people's drinks. "Out of the way! This is a photo shoot." The men on either side of her laughed and obliged her while I took some pictures. We also posed by the exit sign and the jukebox.

We horsed around and took pictures for the next fifteen minutes. The bartender knew us and let us come behind the bar. I posed with my head under a beer tap, my mouth open. He obligingly poured a squirt while Jo snapped away.

Not willing to be outdone, Jo got up on the counter behind the bar and posed in front of the mirrored shelving, two bottles in each hand. Then she stretched out on the bar and pretended to be asleep while the bartender decorated the scene with empty bottles. Pretty soon, everyone was throwing out suggestions. We even made it to the bathroom for a few unusual poses.

Finally, we stumbled back to the table, giggling like school girls. "Okay!" I pounded the table. "We're ready to do this contest." Kira laughed and shook her head.

## Two



I sat in my Creative Writing class and stared at the paper. An A! Underneath the grade, the professor had written, "Good passion." That was a first. I had been struggling with this class all semester.

I wasn't sure I liked Professor Norbert's concept of Creative Writing. His suggested reading list had way too many dense books, with wordy sentences, thick layers of abstraction, and ambiguous conclusions. Hadn't I read enough of that in high school and college? These night-school classes were supposed to be light and easy—an opportunity to do something fun. So why did I have to read such tedious books?

But I put up with the class because I wanted to be a writer. And we've all heard the advice: if you want to be a good writer, you have to read. So that's exactly what I did. I spent much of my free time plowing through book after book, finishing another one every few days. But *I* was the one who picked those books, not Professor Norbert.

If I could have created my own reading list, I'd have chosen the sort of articles and books that I someday hoped to write: stories about rock and roll. That was my goal: to be a famous reporter who covered the music scene, followed bands, and interviewed musicians. I dreamed of being like Ivory Doe of *No Moss* magazine, one of the most famous music journalists out there.

Now some would think I was a hopeless dreamer, and they'd probably be right. But I knew that only one person

#### 14 Sage Ardman

could make my dream come true: me. So I kept reading, and I signed up for a literary masters program at the local college. A master's degree would be a nice ticket-punch that would establish my cred as a writer. And it would improve my writing, too. Along the way, I'd get to read even more books, which seemed like a good thing. Too bad Norbert's reading list was so tiresome.

A woman sitting next to me leaned over and noticed my grade. "Wow! How did you get an A out of Norbert? He's such a hard ass." She had a good point—the guy had been beating me up all semester.

I shrugged. "I just got tired of writing stories based on his reading list. Every time I did that, I got a C. So I figured, the hell with it. Since I can't get a good grade out of him, I'll write about something I really love. A song lyric." I pointed out the title on the first page of my paper. "Fiery Life," of course. My song.

The woman saw where I was pointing, and her mouth fell open. "You're kidding. He let you write about a Fiery Boys song? Since when is he allowing rock-and-roll lyrics in this class?"

"Beats me. But since the Fiery Boys announced their reunion tour, I can't think about much else. So I went for it." I didn't bother telling her that the Fiery Boys were playing here in San Jose, seventy-six days from now. She might think I was obsessed.

To be honest, there was another reason why I wrote about "Fiery Life"—Jo made me do it. She knew all about my lame boyfriends and my issues with Zed. When I signed up for this class, she suggested that I work his story into one of the assignments as a way of processing his death. And Zed's death was intimately linked with that song.

At first, I pointed out that I was already beyond it. I didn't cry for Zed anymore—hadn't in years. But she told me I still had some work to do. I had to stop holding every man up to my idealized memories, because nobody-not even the real Zed-could measure up to the way I remembered him. She was right about that.

Zed had become something of a legend in my mind. The thing I remembered most about him was that he loved to push the boundaries. He was always on the lookout for the next car race, rock concert, or page from the Kama Sutra. Each day with him was like a trip to someplace new.

After he died, I sought out challenging activities that would remind me of him, things outside of my comfort zone. And whenever I did those things, I'd think of Zed and how he'd loved to have all those crazy adventures. I started renting race cars at the local track so I could pretend we were still racing together. I even rode my motorcycle everywhere, shunning my car so I could more acutely feel his presence.

I went to punk and metal concerts, the louder the better, and I danced in the mosh pit, bouncing off other people like human bumper cars. I even went parachuting a few times because Zed and I had talked about it. I didn't worry about jumping because I knew he was proudly watching over me. He wouldn't let anything bad happen.

Yeah, maybe I was a little hung up on the guy. But I couldn't deny that Zed's posthumous encouragement helped me to do all sorts of amazing things. The most recent example was this paper, where I'd ignored the class reading list and used a rock lyric to tell my story. Zed would have approved.

And Jo approved, too. But she was worried about me. She wanted me to stop using him as my silent advisor, living for his imagined good graces. And she wanted me to open up to love. I couldn't keep pushing men away just because the best one had died and the others couldn't compare.

She even pointed out that I had issues with abandonment. Besides Zed dying at the end of senior year, my parents had also abandoned me, at the start of that year. They moved, like they always did, but for the first time in my life, I didn't follow them. Jo claimed that this abandonment by key people in my life was what kept driving me to choose bad boyfriends. If I could let go of these issues, she was certain I'd find love again.

But so far, that hadn't happened. So I stuck to my main priorities, like my writing. And the good news was that I'd just aced this assignment. Maybe all of my reading was paying off.

The class ended, and we started to file out of the room. My new admirer stopped at the professor's desk and pointed to me. "How come you let her write about a rock song? Can we all do that?" Curious, I stopped to hear the answer.

Norbert grunted and leaned back in his chair. "I hate pop music, and I hate song lyrics. They're certainly not what I would call creative writing. But Ms. Ricci did much more than analyze a mediocre poem. She wrote a compelling story that tied in with the lyrics and gave them depth." He nodded at me. "I was moved by your tale. A very inventive story."

My tale? Did he think I'd made it up? I'd be much happier if my paper really was creative writing. But things weren't that way, and I let the professor know it. "I didn't make that story up, sir. It's really about me."

The professor gave me an astonished look. "Very interesting. I'm sorry about your boyfriend."

I returned a weak smile. "That was eight years ago. I'm over it."

But obviously, I wasn't. I was far from over it. Palmer was a typical example of the uninspiring men who filled my life these days. Pale shades of Zed, I tolerated these men but never loved them. Besides, I had better things to do. My job kept me going all day and even on occasional evenings and weekends; I went to writing class two nights a week, did kickboxing on another, and still took time to unwind with my friends on Thursdays. That didn't leave much time for boyfriends.

Palmer was busy, too. He and I both knew that our relationship was going nowhere, and I even asked him about it last week. But he told me he didn't care any more than I did, and then he asked me out again. So at least he knew what he was getting.

And in the meantime, I kept my sights on the things that mattered to me the most—my work, my plans to become a writer, and now a Fiery Boys concert.

## **Three**



Jo and Kira came over to my place on Friday, buzzing with excitement. It had been over a month since the Fiery Boys tour contest had been announced, and tonight they were revealing the winner. Some gorgeous groupie would soon be chosen to ride on their bus, and then the three of us could return to our regular lives.

Palmer was there, too, belittling us for caring so much. Yeah, he and I were still going out, but barely. I ignored his teasing and turned on the television.

Kira poured herself a glass of wine and took a sip. "I'm trying to think positively here." She started to repeat her contest-winning mantra. "I am going to win. I am going to win. I am going to win."

Jo smiled and picked up her glass of whiskey. "I'll show you positive thinking." She shot the drink and dropped the glass on the table. "I am going to get drunk. I am going to get drunk. I am going to get drunk." We laughed, and even Palmer agreed with that sentiment.

Jo turned to me on the sofa. "What about you, Annalisa? Are you going to win or get drunk?"

I wondered if I might just throw up. Even though I was still working on my first beer, my stomach shook like a jumping bean. I mean, how silly was it to be nervous over this, especially when I knew I wouldn't be picked? Neither would Jo—the photographs we'd submitted were jokes. Only Kira had a chance. Maybe I was nervous for her.

We plodded through a few commercials, then an announcer told us what we already knew: it was time for the contest results. And to make the announcement, they introduced the man himself, the lead singer of the Fiery Boys, Chuck Van Dorn. The three of us held our collective breaths.

Chuck wasn't a kid anymore, and he looked great. Even better than he had ten years ago, if that was possible. He wasn't as rail thin and gangly-now he exuded real sexuality, with a come-hither grin and those perfect features. He had his usual beard shadow, long dark hair, and green eyes. Although not my favorite Fiery Boy, I couldn't deny his appeal.

Chuck stood in front of a custom press wall that had the Fiery Boys logo emblazoned all over it. Flashes went off every few seconds, and the camera panned back to show that he was addressing a crowded room of reporters. After a minute of this, he raised his hand to get everyone's attention. Kira crawled to the screen to give him a remote kiss.

As much as I loved the Fiery Boys, I had to admit that I hadn't followed their individual careers since the band broke up. Kira and Jo had to fill me in on the past eight years. They told me that Chuck was the only member of the band who continued to perform. He lived in Las Vegas and played a solo act that he called the Fiery Boy, a one-man tribute band. Although I'd never seen his show—that's how little I cared about him-Io had seen him three or four times, and even Kira had seen his act. Their rock-and-roll crushes still ran strong.

The one I longed to see, of course, was River, the drumming hottie. Like Gabe and Buck, he'd pretty much dropped into obscurity after the band broke up. But I

remained faithful. In my fantasies, he was still the same as in that poster, sitting on his drum throne with his arms in the air and his sticks blurred on their way to strike a cymbal. His bald head still glistened with sweat, and he still had a sparkle in his eye, just for me.

Back in high school, I knew everything about River and read every piece of gossip I could find. Six feet tall, solid and built, he was a Native American who grew up in Minnesota. His last name was Locklear, but he didn't use that in the band. Instead, he made a joke of his name and called himself River Sticks. Back then, I even imagined marrying him, and I would doodle my new name during boring classes. Annalisa Locklear.

In the past month, I'd learned some new things about River, including the fact that he had a girlfriend who he'd been with for years. River didn't want another fiasco like what Buck and Danielle went through, so he kept his relationship quiet—nobody knew anything about this woman. Some reports suggested that he was with Talia Dare, a famous rocker. But other reports denied that rumor. In any case, the fact that he protected this woman so well made me like him even more. I couldn't wait to see him again.

But River wasn't on the television today, only Chuck. The crowd in the audience quieted down and we knew something was coming. "Oh my God!" Kira squealed as she flapped her hands in the air.

Chuck warmed up the audience like a true entertainer, owning the space as if this was a concert. "Let's see, are there any Fiery Boys fans here?" The crowd cheered and whistled while Chuck bathed himself in their love.

After a few seconds of this, he held up his hands to quiet them. "Okay. So the good news is, we're back." As

expected, the reporters erupted again, and more flashes sparkled Chuck's dazzling face. He stepped from the podium to hug a female reporter who hugged him back with a little scream. The lead singer of the Fiery Boys knew how to work a crowd.

Chuck got back to the podium and went on with his pitch. "We have some new songs, some new videos, and we're going on tour next month. Gabe, Buck, River, and I are totally stoked. We're coming to your town, and we're burning it!" He couldn't resist the usual fire-related expressions—a band theme. Almost all of their songs had something to do with fire, especially my special song, "Fiery Life," which Chuck had written. So although he wasn't my favorite band member, I wouldn't complain if the author of "Fiery Life" wanted me to go on tour with him. I wouldn't complain if he wanted to do anything else with me, either!

Chuck finally got down to the matter at hand. "Now some of you may know that we've been running a little contest here. One lucky girl is going to be picked to tour with us for a week. We got fifteen thousand pictures from all of you, and it was hard to decide. River and I loved all of the pretty faces. Gabe was particularly fond of the X-rated pictures you girls sent us." He pointed at the camera and winked. "He'll be writing to you later for more."

Chuck paused, and I knew what was coming: a Buck joke. He always teased Buck, calling him dumb, mocking him about his girlfriend, or suggesting that he was so stupid, he couldn't even remember his own name. And the name issue wasn't as far-fetched as it seemed, because Buck's real name was Charles. Before he'd joined the Fiery Boys, people had called him Chuck. But the band couldn't have two Chucks, so the bass player became Buck. Of course, this only gave Chuck more openings to mock him.

#### 22 Sage Ardman

The zinger arrived on schedule. "And Buck?" Chuck grinned for an extra beat before delivering the punchline. "He can't even remember which end of the bass to pluck." The audience laughed.

This was the standard Fiery Boys story. Chuck was the lady killer singer, Gabe was the Zen-yet-horny guitarist, River was the hard-drinking drummer, and Buck was the dumb bass player. I didn't mind this much because I was willing to drink hard with River. All he had to do was say the word. And I seriously doubted Buck was dumb.

Chuck continued to ride the media frenzy. "Okay, so here's the big announcement. Believe it or not, none of the entries got unanimous approval from us, but the winner was definitely the first choice for three of us. So without delay, let's have a drum roll for the lucky girl." He turned around as if looking for his backup drummer, but the other band members were obviously not there. He turned back to the camera and laughed lightly. "Oops, no drums. Okay, the winner is..."

Chuck paused and gave the camera a sly grin. Kira screamed a little. Jo shouted at the television, "Do it, already!" Palmer was so bored that he was on his phone, ignoring us. And I just sat there perfectly relaxed, calmly gripping my beer with enough force to shatter the glass.

Chuck reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, and stared at it for a few seconds. Then he faced the camera with a smile and said the most outrageous thing I'd ever heard in my life.

He said my name.

"The winner is Annalisa Ricci from San Jose, California." I froze and stared at the television, too stunned to even let the news register. A dreamlike cloud wrapped itself around me, challenging me to accept the fact that the lead

singer of the Fiery Boys had just invited me to tour with him. Kira and Jo were screaming, but I could barely hear them next to the dizzying vortex that was swirling around my head. Something was wrong here. My friends must have slipped something into my drink.

The crowd in front of Chuck kept applauding for what seemed like an hour. It went on and on and on in druggy slow motion while my name actually flashed at the bottom of the screen. I still didn't believe it—someone was punking me. They were just waiting for me to buy it, then the truth would be revealed and everyone would laugh.

So I sat there and let their joke play out, waiting for the inevitable resolution. Perhaps Chuck would say "LOL, just kidding," and then read the *real* contest results. Or this might be a fake video that Palmer had made to tease me. He enjoyed doing things like that. I scrutinized the screen to see if I could detect signs of a cheap video editing job, but the picture looked good, so this probably wasn't a prank. Besides, Palmer seemed just as surprised as I was. He even yelled at the television and warned the Fiery Boys not to mess with his girl. How quaint! He thought he had to defend me from them. As if I'd choose Palmer over anyone in the band. And it was starting to occur to me that I might actually get such a choice.

Jo slapped me on the back, which brought me back to reality. "Congrats, girl! I told you that picture would be a winner."

A winner? Impossible! It didn't make sense. After we'd taken those pictures at the bar last month, we sat at our table and reviewed them. All of them were so ridiculous that we simply couldn't choose. So we decided that each of us would choose the other's best shot. I picked the first picture of Jo, lounging against the bar. She looked good—

#### 24 Sage Ardman

sexy and desirable. The Fiery Boys would appreciate the fire in her eyes.

Then Jo chose the worst possible shot for me—the dumbest, most embarrassing, and most awkward picture that anyone had ever taken of me. Contest suicide. I remember pointing this out to her, but she refused to reconsider her choice. She reminded me that our photos needed to tell a story, and this one said all sorts of things about me. In her opinion, it was a winning picture. I guess she was right.

But back then, I didn't protest the picture selection because it didn't really matter. There wasn't a single picture of me in the batch that I thought could win this contest. I was not supposed to be the winner. Someone else was.

The excitement finally died down, so Chuck went on. "And for all you other girls who didn't win, I'm going to show you why. Take a look at Annalisa!"

I cringed and tried to sink deeper into my chair as the screen filled with my contest submission. Jo had caught me laughing and spraying my drink, beer erupting from my mouth in a fine mist. If it hadn't been for the drink spray, it might have been a decent shot. A wisp of black hair swept across my face, my dark eyes sparkled, and my laughter was so infectious that the reporters joined right in. But I was no beauty, so I couldn't understand how I got picked.

Palmer hadn't seen this picture, and he wasn't very happy to see it now. "You look like a drunk whore." Wow, thanks for taking it to the next level. I get that I was drunk, but couldn't he have stopped there? As if I needed more reasons to break up with him.

Chuck spoke again, which saved me from having to defend my photo. "Now that's the kind of girl we want on tour with us. I bet she could drink us under the table." The reporters laughed harder, which didn't seem to help Palmer's mood at all.

Kira scowled at the television. "I can drink, too, Chuck!" Right now, I wished she had won.

My new buddy, Chuck, took me aside for a moment. He faced the camera and spoke quietly. "Hey, Annalisa girl. You'll be getting a call soon from the band manager. If you don't hear in the next hour, get in touch with us and we'll get you on the bus."

Chuck's voice returned to normal. "And for everyone else, come on down and see us. You can check the tour schedule and get tickets online."

Finally, Chuck gave everyone his famous exit line. "Bye for now. And remember..." He wound up for the big delivery and roared it into the microphone, "Keep on burning!" He raised his arms in the now-famous Fiery Boys hand sign, the backs of his hands to the camera with his fingers wiggling straight up like licks of fire.

I stared numbly at the screen until Jo turned off the television. That helped return my breathing to normal. But then my phone rang and the sensation of weirdness returned. I reached for the phone but it slipped through my fingers. Good thing Jo understood my temporary inability to function normally—she picked it up and handed it to me.

Wow. Either this was an incredibly elaborate prank, or I was about to go on tour with the Fiery Boys.

## **Four**



By Monday, I was over the shock. I'd finally accepted that I—yes I—was going to live with the Fiery Boys on their tour bus. For a whole week! I had moved past the disbelief, the spontaneous eruptions of excitement, and the attempts to pinch myself awake.

I spent most of the weekend immersed in the Fiery Boys, listening to their music on endless loop, especially the new album they'd recorded to accompany this reunion tour. I danced myself into a daze, like I used to ten years earlier. But now, I imagined them playing live, right in front of me. Yeah, I was getting pretty fixated on the Fiery Boys.

Unfortunately, the rest of the world didn't spend the weekend fixated on the Fiery Boys. Instead, they focused on me, giving me something I never thought I'd have. Fame.

As soon as Chuck spoke my name on Friday, the world went certifiably insane. I had thousands of friend requests from total strangers, and I had to close all my social media accounts. New websites popped up, filled entirely with lies about me. I really should have stopped using the web altogether, but I couldn't resist checking myself out. It was just so bizarre to see my name on every fan site I visited.

Some of the sites were silly and made me laugh. Others were not so nice. One site gave out my cell phone number, and dozens of strangers started to call and text me. Now I couldn't even use my phone and had to get a new number. Quite a few sites were filled with haters making angry diatribes against me, calling for my death and

disembowelment. One of them even sported a cheap photo edit of my head on a spike. I mean, seriously? These hate sites had hundreds of nasty comments about me, and I admit I read quite a few of them before I stopped looking.

Strange as it sounded, I was trending.

This new attention made me—shall we say—concerned. But the Fiery Boys had it under control. When the band manager, Jason Bartholomew, called me on Friday, he told me not to worry about any death threats that might appear on the Internet. And just in case, he sent a bodyguard to watch over me. Of course, this only made me worry more.

Half an hour later, my hired muscle arrived. And I do mean muscle. Dressed in a classic henchman's black suit, Vaughan was medium height but super built. And cute. He had a smile lurking under that solid exterior, and he exuded an enthusiasm that I liked right away.

Vaughan gave me a few pointers about dealing with the media and also gave me his cell number, assuring me he'd answer at any hour. Then he went outside to camp on my street, promising to always be near.

Kira and Jo were still caught up in the excitement of my victory, so they stopped Vaughan and plied him with questions about the Fiery Boys. Kira even came back over the weekend, ostensibly to see me, but primarily to talk to my bodyguard about his amazing rock-and-roll bosses. She was starstruck.

On Saturday morning, Vaughan took me outside, wrapped in a hoodie to hide my face. He'd been wandering among the paparazzi who had quickly gathered around my home, so he gave me a tour, pointing out where each of them was hiding. To put it mildly, I was shocked. All these people were here for me?

#### 28 Sage Ardman

That afternoon, I tried out the fame game, just for fun. I went out to a grocery store without concealing my face, and the cameras flashed nonstop. Then I looked around the web and found the pictures, hideous photos that made me seem ugly and misshapen. It was as if they'd intentionally chosen the worst ones. Lesson one was simple: stay covered.

But even with my face hidden, the reporters shouted questions as I moved quickly to my car. Each question was more absurd than the last.

"What do you think of the theory that they projected all the pictures on a wall and threw a dart?" I thought the theory was great—it explained so much. Of course I didn't tell them that. Vaughan insisted that I resist the urge to talk to them.

Besides, the next question got fired at me before I could have answered the first. "Can you confirm that you've been River Sticks' secret lover for years?" Ahh, don't I wish.

Then came the question that stopped me for a few seconds, no doubt with a look of shock that the paparazzi loved to shoot. "Are you going to have sex with all four of them?"

Oh, come on! In my more reasonable moments, I knew that I wasn't going to have sex with any of them. But my life was suddenly steeped in nonsense, and I became less and less reasonable every day. I couldn't deny that I'd gladly jump River or even Buck—two gorgeous men who I hoped I'd be able to meet without losing total bodily control. Even Chuck was a fine-looking hunk of man who I'd never turn down. But all four of them in one week? Not happening.

With Vaughan at my place, protecting me, I was able to deal with another aspect of my newly skewed life: Palmer. As expected, he was majorly upset by all the attention I was getting and instantly became jealous that I was going on

vacation with four famous, handsome, and desirable men. He was also envious that I was being talked about everywhere. And yes, he was even uncomfortable that I had a muscular bodyguard. I couldn't deny that he had plenty of reasons to be jealous.

Palmer insisted on staying with me Friday night, claiming he needed to protect me. I knew better, and I could have done without his issues, but I let him stay because he was part of my former life, when nobody knew who I was. I found some small comfort there. Too bad he spent the entire time online, cursing at the screen and announcing each new website about me with increased irritation. I ignored him and eventually went to bed.

When I woke up Saturday morning, he was asleep next to me. Relieved that he wasn't venting anymore, I got up quietly and went to the kitchen. Then I sat and thought about my life, grateful for some alone time.

Unfortunately, Palmer soon got up and decided to confront the reporters directly, even though Vaughan had already advised us not to do that. Armed with his need to protect me and his lack of common sense, he stormed outside and exploded at the reporters who descended upon him. He even punched a photographer and trashed the man's camera.

Good thing Vaughan was there to help me out. He dragged my raging, purple-faced boyfriend inside and made him sit down. I stepped back to take a long look at this man, and I didn't like what I saw.

Vaughan tried to explain things once again, but that only made Palmer more angry. He railed at my bodyguard and accused him of trying to steal me away. But when Vaughan wouldn't respond to that, Palmer got even angrier. And with nobody else left to attack, he turned his anger on me. This—he raged—was all my fault.

That did it. I'd finally had enough. I was through with this angry man who thought his smothering devotion was more important than a week with the Fiery Boys. Did he actually think he could save me by fighting the paparazzi?

So I told him about his new status as my ex-boyfriend. Vaughan glared at him the entire time, then threatened him with assorted bodily harm if he talked about me to the press. Stunned and speechless, Palmer grabbed the various personal effects he kept at my place and left. It was one of the easiest break ups I've ever had to do. Yeah, the next time I needed to end a difficult relationship, I'd definitely get another bodyguard.

So with all this screwy stuff going on, I was very happy when Monday rolled around and I got to go to work. The house had become my prison—a change of scenery was essential. I drove to the car dealership and went directly to my supervisor's office. "Ed, I'm taking off a week in June. Vacation."

He looked up from his desk and smiled. "Yeah, I heard about your vacation. Partying with a rock band. Nice."

Was there anyone who didn't know? I squinted at him. "Are you a Fiery Boys fan?"

"Nah. But my wife loves them. She recognized your name when they announced the contest winner. Got real excited. I knew you'd be taking some time off."

I nodded toward the showroom, which was already starting to fill up with suspicious-looking, camera-wielding men. "Then you don't mind the photographers who are taking pictures out there?"

"Are you kidding? This is great publicity! I've got a famous saleswoman now." Ed laughed. "But the gents are totally annoyed."

Ugh, the gents. I worked at a high-end auto dealership and was a pretty good salesperson. The other three people doing sales were "the gents," a group of men who thought women didn't know anything about cars and couldn't sell one to save their lives. But thanks to my dad and Zed, I knew plenty. I could tune an engine so it purred, knew all the automotive jargon, and had good people skills. But as far as the gents were concerned, there was no place for me on the showroom floor.

All during my first week of work, the gents did their best to make me fail. They insisted on "helping" me with every deal, and corrected each thing I told the customers. From financing to warranty issues to the forms needed for custom orders, they would interrupt me and do their best to make me look foolish. Sometimes they would actually steal my customer away. I was ready to dig three shallow graves.

But instead, their challenges only drove me harder. I paid careful attention and soon had all of the details right. In the middle of my third week, I confronted them and demanded that they stop sabotaging me. With smug condescension, they agreed to leave me alone if I could outsell them for just one day.

That was their big mistake. I went home that night and made a list of their offenses, vowing to use every one of those tactics against them. The next day, I made sure to interrupt every customer they had, using the same lame excuses they had used on me. Where they had once pointed out, "You're new, so let me help you with this," I commented, "You're a bit rusty, so let me help you with this." Where one of them had said, "I know you kids like to

write with a flourish, but you have to stay inside the boxes or the machine won't read it," I told him "I know you old people have shaky hands, but you have to stay inside the boxes or the machine won't read it."

I even matched the nasty comments they'd made to me. One of them had attempted to steal a customer by pointing out that it takes more than a skirt to sell a car. So on payback day, I interrupted him and pointed out to his customer that it takes more than a cheap suit to be a car salesman. This started a round of ribbing that quickly escalated. I stayed calm, but the gent totally lost it. And after a few insult volleys, the customer walked away. Of course, I followed him, apologized for the outburst, and offered him an extra discount. The man agreed, and bought the car from me.

The gents kept up the fight all day long, using every tired trick that I'd seen for weeks. But I was beyond their games, and I already knew how to play. Their attempts to steal my customers backfired royally.

Did I really need to go that far and be that nasty? Probably not. I could compete fairly with any of those losers. But they were the ones who had declared war, so I rolled out the heavy artillery. I sold quite a few cars, and by the end of the day, had outsold the three gents, combined. They were supremely annoyed.

I made them honor the bet, and I never let them give me grief again. We agreed to stop sabotaging each other's sales and to talk to each other only when there weren't any customers around. This was exactly what I wanted: to be left alone to do my job. Good thing Ed was on my side.

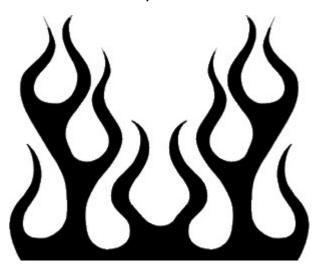
Back on the sales floor, I wondered how many customers would be Fiery Boys fans. Would my job still be normal? The Fiery Boys had a young audience, and the people who could afford these cars were usually older. With any luck, I'd be able to escape my life as a Fiery Boys contest winner for a few hours each day.

Soon, a nice-looking family came into the dealership, Mom and Dad strutted proudly while their children played hide-and-seek. Dad pointed to some of the cars, and Mom nodded. A serious couple—I could tell they were ready to buy. I watched them carefully, noting which models each of them favored while I leaned against a car, waiting for Dad to notice me. When he finally did, he smiled, but thankfully didn't recognize me. I smiled back, sauntered over, and sold another luxury vehicle.

The guy barely bargained with me, and I scored a hefty commission. Hell, I could have made that sale in my sleep. I wondered if I had. After my crazy weekend, I still wasn't sure I was fully awake. But it was nice to know that I didn't need to be the famous contest winner all the time. I could be my old self when I went to work. Life could be normal.

But in the back of my mind, I knew that nothing was normal anymore. The sooner I was on the road with the Fiery Boys, the better. And even though River had a girlfriend, the chance to ply my charms on him still ranked as my most cherished fantasy.

# Day One



## **Five**



As the plane took off from San Jose, I was bursting with excitement. Soon I would meet my teenage idols. I would live with them, go to their concerts, and watch from the wings. Yes, I would have the coveted all-access backstage pass. The dream vacation of fifteen thousand women, and I was living it.

By the time the plane landed in Chicago, my overactive mind was at it again. I worried about being able to get along with these four unknown men. How would I fit in to this all-male environment? I also fretted about my reputation, already shredded on the Internet and about to get significantly worse. The haters had gotten vitriolic over the past month, all of them certain I was going to have legendary sex that would kill the band. And although I knew I wouldn't be that much of a groupie, I couldn't deny my nervousness over being so close to Chuck, Buck, River, and Gabe. This was going to be a wild adventure.

Vaughan, my invisible bodyguard, had come with me all the way. In the airport lounge, he stayed on the other side of the room, watching everyone. Whenever people recognized me and gathered around, he was there, pretending to be one of the fans but secretly making sure nobody got out of line. After I finished chatting with them, they would disburse, and he would walk away like the rest of them. On the flight, he sat a few rows back.

When I got off the plane, I suddenly felt light-headed to be in the same city as the Fiery Boys, about to move in. I blindly followed the other passengers toward baggage claim.

Just past security, a cluster of limousine drivers stood holding out cards with passenger's names on them. I spotted my name, and I nearly laughed when I saw who was holding the card. This guy had "roadie" written all over him. Whereas the other drivers wore black suits, white shirts, and ties, my driver had a well-worn T-shirt and threadbare jeans. And I'm not talking about those stylishly distressed jeans you see people wear. His were seriously torn, with large pieces missing around the knees. His T-shirt was for Alejandro, a popular rocker whose music I also liked. And rather than standing at attention like the other limo drivers, he was dancing in place, rocking to the music in his ears, having a grand old time. I stopped in front of him and watched.

He was obviously enjoying himself, smiling wide with his eyes closed. I didn't want to disturb him. Besides, he was doing a wonderful little dance there, throwing his head back and shaking his hands while he clutched the card with my name on it. It made me happy to be there.

Vaughan gave him a whack on the shoulder as he walked by, forcing him to stop moving and open his eyes. The two men exchanged brief grunts of recognition, then Vaughan wandered off and left me to introduce myself.

"Hi, I'm Annalisa."

The man nodded and gave me a thumbs up. "Hey, contest girl. Welcome to Chicago. I'm Big Tim." He didn't seem that big to me. We shook hands and headed for the baggage area.

"Are you a roadie, Tim?"

"I'm a driver. Actually, I'm your driver, if you're riding on the band bus. And also, call me *Big Tim* so everyone knows who you're talking about."

I laughed. "You got a Tiny Tim, too?"

"Nah, but we got a *Bigger* Tim. You gotta use the full name because nobody knows who you're talking about when you just say Tim."

I was having fun now. Big Tim was 100 percent rock and roll, a classic. Tattoos on one arm, long unkempt hair, and dark sunglasses. I was definitely with the band.

Okay, maybe I wasn't with the band yet, but I was with someone who was with the band. That ought to count for something. While I waited for my bag to arrive, Big Tim plugged his headphones back in and bobbed his head to the beat.

When we got to his car, it didn't surprise me to see Vaughan sitting in the back seat. We drove into town while the car's impressive sound system pounded us with music. I had a million questions I wanted to ask, but it was hard to speak with the volume cranked. So I sat and watched the road go by.

In the silence between songs, I worked in a question. "Are we going to meet the band now?"

Big Tim turned down the volume. "I'm supposed to take you to see Mr. Bartholomew. He's the manager."

"Right. Jason Bartholomew. This contest was his idea, right?"

Big Tim shook his head. "Not likely. He hates this contest."

"He does? Then whose idea was it?"

"Beats me. Whoever it was must have been out of his fucking mind."

I understood completely. Lots of people seemed to be out of their fucking minds. Like the people who chose me as the contest winner. And the people who hated that I was the contest winner. And perhaps even Big Tim. Maybe they all were—I was about to find out.

I started by asking about the band manager's mind. "Why does Mr. Bartholomew hate this contest? Is he upset about having a girl on the bus?"

"Hey, we get lots of girls on the bus. But they usually only stay until they've gotten a piece of ass, then they're gone. That's why we don't think you'll survive a week. We even got a pool going on you."

"A pool? You're betting on how long it'll be before I run?"

Big Tim grinned. "Yep. I got you down for two days."

"I got you down for five," Vaughan chimed in from the back seat.

I sat there stunned. Everyone on the crew thought I'd wash out. I hadn't considered that I wouldn't last a week.

My litany of fears started to play again, loud and insistent. But I forced them away, refusing to worry about how long I'd last. After all, I was here now, on my way to meet the Fiery Boys. And even if it lasted only fifteen minutes, I could handle it.

The truth was, meeting new, potentially hostile people didn't scare me—I'd endured plenty of that when I was younger. My dad was in the military, and we moved every year or two, from city to city and from country to country. Each time we moved, I'd have to make new friends, break into new cliques, and get accepted. I learned to stay quiet at first and observe people, then dive in when I was ready.

Most of all, I learned the importance of having a good attitude when meeting new people. And since I was about

to meet the Fiery Boys, my attitude was at an all-time high. So I told myself that I was once again making new friends, and we'd soon be having the best of times together. Just another first day at a new school.

I gave Big Tim a defiant grin. "Two days, huh? Am I expected to just quit, or will they find me by the side of the road, drooling and babbling?"

Big Tim laughed. "I was thinking drool and babble, but now that I've met you, I'm upgrading you to just quit."

"Thanks, Big Tim. I appreciate that. But you might want to revise your bet. I'm not afraid of any crap the band might throw my way. This is a huge dream of mine, so I doubt they can scare me off."

"Oh, they're plenty scary. But it's not just the boys who are going to drive you away. It's the fans. That's the reason we all think this is a bad idea."

"Yeah, nobody's happy about me winning this contest. Have you seen what they're saying on the Internet?"

Big Tim sputtered. "Hey! Rule number one: don't read about yourself on the Internet. None of the band members do, except maybe Chuck."

"Oh, well, too late. I know women are jealous all over the world. Some of them get really nasty. And men are either calling me an ugly dog or a CWILF."

"A CWILF?"

I didn't know why, but I was fond of this acronym, even though it was crude and rude. With perverse pride, I explained it. "Contest Winner I'd Like to Fuck." I waited while he chuckled. "Pretty cool, huh? I've got my own Internet meme."

Big Tim tilted his head. "This doesn't bother you?"

"Maybe a little, but I'm not sure what I expected. This whole deal has been strange from the start. The night

#### 40 Sage Ardman

Chuck spoke my name on television, I became an instant celebrity."

And it never let up. Eventually, I got used to the fact that every story about the Fiery Boys had to mention me. I'd seen myself on television and even on the front page of a supermarket tabloid. After a month of this abuse, I longed for the safety of the band bus where I'd be surrounded by four much more famous people. Another reason why I didn't think I'd be running home anytime soon.

I blew out my breath. "I don't have a normal life anymore, Big Tim. The Fiery Boys took care of that. So even if the bus is a living hell, I'm staying on board, safe from the paparazzi, while you drive me around. I hope you don't mind."

Big Tim stared at me. "I think I'll revise my bet to six days."

I laughed. "Not going for all seven?"

He shrugged. "Don't need to. Nobody's betting on any more than five." He smirked as he nodded toward the back seat.

# Six



We pulled into a motel and parked, kicking my heart into a thumping Fiery Boys beat. I knew it was just a meeting with the band manager, but that put me one step closer to the band. Tonight I'd be sleeping on the bus with my rock-and-roll heroes. Alone—I understood that part—but still *on the bus*. I fanned myself with my hand.

As we walked to the room, Big Tim explained. "The band members get their own bus, and the lowlifes crowd onto the second one. But Mr. Bartholomew is so important that he has his own car and stays in motels." He grinned. "Personally, I think he hates us. Don't know why he's managing this band." Big Tim stopped and knocked on a door.

Given that Jason Bartholomew didn't like this contest, I doubted he'd be happy to see me. Regardless, I was going to do my best to make friends with him. He could love me or he could hate me—it would be up to him. I knew there was no in-between with me anymore; peoples' opinions always fell to one extreme or the other.

The door was opened by a balding, medium-height man, wearing a button-down shirt and dark slacks. He squinted at me. "You must be Annalisa." Oozing propriety, he crisply shook my hand and escorted me into the room. I'd guess he was in his forties, going on sixty. And awkward. Either he disliked me, or this was simply his way with everyone.

#### 42 Sage Ardman

I made sure my opening salvo was full-bore friendly. "I'm really excited to be here, Mr. Bartholomew."

"I'll bet you are." He gave me a smile that was half real and half plastic. I didn't mind—at least he was smiling. "Have a seat." He waved stiffly toward a chair. "And call me Jason."

We sat down at a table that was scattered with papers, many sporting the Fiery Boys logo. I noticed equipment manifests, song lists, security schedules, and motel reservations. Everything about the Fiery Boys was right there.

Seeing all this back office activity for my favorite band made me even more excited. I realized where I was, at the hub of Fiery Boys central, talking to the faceless man who pulled the levers. And he was preparing to admit me into the inner workings of the machine—the fabled Fiery Boys engine. I started to breathe a little faster.

Jason looked at me, and his smile grew slightly. "I assume you're a big fan."

He had me there. I fluttered my hands. "Oh, God! Huge. I hope I can keep it together when I meet them." I was barely doing that already, and this guy was just the manager.

Jason laughed derisively. "Well, let me give you a tip. The Fiery Boys are nothing more than four stupid kids who made it big. And I'm not just talking about Buck, the so-called dumb one."

There was that idea again that Buck was dumb. Sure, he didn't say much and was somewhat slow when he spoke, but he never said anything truly stupid. Back in high school, I decided he was cautious. It seemed to me that the people who called him stupid were just annoyed that he

had a steady girlfriend and a famous father. And as I now understood, haters gonna hate.

I cocked my head and stared at Jason. "So-called?"

He allowed a half grin. "You know that the Fiery Boys are a manufactured band, don't you? I handpicked them over ten years ago." He leaned toward me and thumped the papers on his desk. "I created them."

Okay, that was disturbing. I leaned away from the table. "Are you saying that you scripted their personalities? You told Buck to act dumb?"

He nodded, his smile gone. I wanted to tell him how appalled I was, but I knew better.

"Impressive," I lied.

Jason smiled and leaned back in his chair. "In truth, it was more of a group effort. I had to work with these four kids. So I adjusted them here and there, crafted them into the perfect product." Wow. The Fiery Boys weren't people; they were product. Very creepy.

"So Buck's not really dumb?"

"It would have been more accurate to call him deliberate. And certainly horny. He and Danielle couldn't keep their hands off each other. The dumbest thing he did was to marry that woman, for which he's still paying."

"Everyone says Danielle destroyed the band." This was a test, of course. I was floating the most popular story just to see how Jason would react.

"Everyone is wrong." Good—he passed the test. Perhaps we'd get along, after all.

He sat back up and knit his brows. "Listen, the boys are together again, but it's a fragile truce. And I intend to keep it that way through this tour." He leaned closer. "That means you, too." He glared at me.

#### 44 Sage Ardman

This seemed like the true Jason Bartholomew. Nasty and controlling, but direct. "What about me?" I gave him a fake smile to show I could do that, too.

He blew out a long breath. "I'm not terribly crazy about this contest idea—our public relations people insisted. But you're here now, so I'm not going to complain. Still, I don't want you screwing the Fiery Boys like some horny groupie. It'll really anger the fans. Your job is to smile, be friendly with the boys, and *don't get too close*. Especially with Chuck. He's a whore who fucks four groupies at once." He wagged a finger at me. "Just don't do it."

Don't have sex with the Fiery Boys? Well, first of all, I didn't really believe that would ever be an option. But I had dreams, and if any of them came true, I was certainly not going to refuse. I wasn't sixteen years old anymore, and I didn't need daddy's permission to stay out all night.

I pushed back lightly. "Or if I do have sex with any of them, I should keep it a secret, right?"

Jason shook his head. "It's no secret that the contest winner is riding on the bus, and every fan expects the boys to screw your brains out. Even if you never go near them, we'll have a hard time convincing the fans of that. But if you show up at Chuck's orgies, the fans will get even nastier." He lowered his gaze at me. "Don't think they can't get nastier."

"Jeez, all right. I'll be good." Maybe. Unless River smiled at me—then I'd be bad. Real bad.

Jason nodded. "There's something you need to know about how you got chosen. Truth is, this was *not* a beauty contest."

I raised a curious eyebrow. Jason might not like me, but he was offering all sorts of useful information. Good thing I was meeting him first. "Okay, why did you pick me?"

"First of all, it wasn't me. The boys chose you. But I wouldn't allow anyone too pretty or sexy because it would anger the fans, so I culled them out. You see, by choosing someone plain, someone who looks like an average fan, the other contestants would think it could have been them. They wouldn't feel like they were ineligible because of their looks, just unlucky. So if you thought there were four horny boys on that bus who couldn't wait to jump your bones, you're wrong."

All right, hold on a second. Did he just tell me I was ugly? Did he say I was chosen because I'm no better looking than the average Fiery Boys fan? Wow, talk about a punch to the ego.

Look, I get it. I'm not a breathtaking beauty. Kira and Jo are both prettier than I am. But couldn't Jason let me hold the delusion that my smiling, beer-spraying countenance had somehow charmed the Fiery Boys? I didn't need to hear that I was an unappealing dog right before meeting them.

"Ugh. I'm sorry I asked."

"Hey, don't get all paranoid here. Besides, I have to say you're better looking than I expected." He sat back in his chair and studied me. "You only sent a head shot, so I assumed you had an unattractive body. But you're really not bad at all. Tall, too."

Nice attempt at a compliment. He was willing to admit that I wasn't a complete mongrel. But Jason's honesty was starting to wear thin, and my good mood was shot. I couldn't resist poking back at him. "Screw you for wishing I was fugly."

He shrugged, apparently unperturbed by this kind of abuse. "It only means you'll have to fight off Chuck even

harder. Other than that, I don't care. You won the contest, so go enjoy yourself."

Fine, I could adapt. As the woman who won the title of homeliest fan, I was still the winner. And I'd play it for the incredible victory that it appeared to be. So what if River wouldn't hunger for me? So what if nobody would want to party with me? I'd still be on the bus and behind the scenes during shows, watching the Fiery Boys up close. And who knows? Perhaps someone in the band would be nice to me.

I nodded at Jason. "I guess it's good to hear the truth, every once in a while. But I still love the Fiery Boys, and I can't wait to meet them."

Jason smirked. "You like to hear the truth? Then let me give you a little background about the boys. Stuff we don't usually release to the press. It'll help deflate your overblown love of those four clowns."

Jason held up one finger. "First, let's talk about Chuck. I know all you fan girls love the boy, but trust me, he's an insecure and egotistical rocker. If you sleep with him, you'll end up like a thousand other groupies." He grunted a warning. "Don't. Fuck. Chuck." I could tell he said that a lot.

Jason raised two fingers. "Gabe. Horny lead guitarist. Don't get any ideas with him, either. He's a zombie."

Like Chuck, Gabe was a lady-killer, always seen with different women. But he was also the peaceful one who closed his eyes when he played. This gave him the unusual reputation of being horny and Zen. "I thought he was the meditative one. How did he get to be a zombie? Drugs?"

Jason twisted his mouth and nodded. "Fucking pothead. The guy is totally checked out. I used to rely on him to take care of things, but he's much less invested this time around. You're going to have to reevaluate your tenyear-old crushes on him and Chuck."

"I didn't have a crush on Chuck or Gabe. It was the other two I always liked."

Jason stared at me. "Really? You preferred Buck?"

"Well, River was actually my favorite. Buck was a close second."

"Hmm. Maybe they picked the right girl, after all. Still, River isn't happy to be back on tour. I made him shave his head again and now he just sits and stews. You'll be lucky if you get one sentence out of him. And as for Buck, these days he's just plain angry. Something about his divorce. I'm sorry to tell you that the two Fiery Boys you liked the most are the two most unpleasant members of the band. I hope you're good at making friends."

I laughed because I was a pro at making friends. "I'll do what I can."

"Well, if it gets too weird, you can stay in motels. It's up to you. Personally, I think it's much better than that bus."

"Rolling pigsty?"

"Absolutely. And you never know when some groupies will storm it to get a piece of band ass. Some of them can be mean and crazy."

"Gee, this sounds better all the time." I still wasn't worried. If some groupie wanted a piece of band ass, they were welcome to it.

"So you'll take the motel?"

A motel room sounded much nicer than the bus, which was certainly the belly of the beast. But I'd come here for that beast and I wouldn't be denied. Adventures like this were the things I lived for, so motel rooms would be my last refuge. For now, I wanted them to bring on the circus. Horny groupies? Who cares? Surly band members? No surprise there. An abrasive band manager and roadies who think I'll wash out? What did I expect?

#### 48 Sage Ardman

"No. I'll take the bus. Like the song says, I owe myself a fiery life. If I'm going to do this, then I'm going all the way."

"Fiery Life,' huh? You like that song?"

"It's my favorite. The melody always makes me weepy, and the lyrics were custom written for me. Chuck is a genius. I might be more attracted to River and Buck, but I wouldn't refuse an offer from Chuck simply because of that song."

Jason darkened. "Chuck is *not* a genius. Song or no song, if you screw him, I'll throw you off the bus myself."

"Jeez! Don't worry, Jason. I won't have sex with Chuck. Okay?"

Jason sputtered a laugh. "We'll see."

## Seven



The Fiery Boys had been on tour for the past week, but their first Chicago show was coming up that night. As we approached the back lot of the arena, the band's tour bus was instantly recognizable. Mostly black, with bold red flames licking upward, the artwork from their first album filled all four sides of the bus. The band name was spelled out in fat red letters that hovered in the blackness, just out of reach of the flames. Either I was a little too excited to be here, or that hot red bus carried a phallic message that was hard to miss.

Next to this rolling billboard for the Fiery Boys sat a more average-looking bus with the band name written in appropriate-size letters. And over by the arena, two tractor-trailers were parked at a loading dock. The band name on the trucks was also reasonably sedate. A part of me wished I wasn't riding in that advertisement-on-wheels, but another part of me was thrilled with the idea.

As we got closer, I saw a small crowd, desperate to see a rock star but thwarted by a makeshift fence that protected the busses and trucks. I couldn't blame the fans—I wanted to see these rock stars, too. But unlike them, I was about to do just that. I tried to suppress the feeling of superiority that I knew I didn't deserve.

We pulled up to the fence, and the fans gathered. Mostly female, they squinted into the car to find out who had arrived. Even though the windows were tinted, I shrank down, afraid of their reaction to me.

Quite a few women gathered, and I was surprised by what I saw. If I didn't know there was a famous rock band close by, I'd have wondered if these women were hookers. They were dressed in some incredibly revealing outfits, not all of which were street legal. Clearly, they were hoping to seduce a Fiery Boy or two.

On the other side of the fence, people ran back and forth, consulted clipboards, yelled instructions, and hauled equipment. Big Tim rolled down the window as a larger man approached the car. This guy was tall and solid, like two Marines squeezed into one body. He leaned in and squinted at me. "You're Annalisa?"

I nodded, and the man leaned farther down. "I'm Bigger Tim." He certainly was. "Fiery Boys head of security." He punctuated his job title with a curt nod, then grumbled as he stood back up. "Didn't expect you this soon."

Bigger Tim seemed upset to see me, so I did my best to placate him. "I'm willing to wait, if you're not ready for me."

He leaned back down. "Yeah. Now's not the best time. . ." He tightened his mouth and looked away.

I tried to lighten the mood. "Room's not made up yet?"

My joke cracked Bigger Tim's facade and he blew out a half-laugh. "Okay, what the fuck? Go on in. You won't last long, anyway." With a smirk, he pulled away a section of the fence.

Why did everyone think I'd wash out? Were the Fiery Boys the most evil band ever, or did the crew have me pegged as a timid wallflower? Even Bigger Tim seemed to dislike me, more than the others. I wondered if his bet was measured in hours instead of days.

As we pulled up to the Fiery Boys bus, I realized that I didn't care what the crew thought. I was here now, and nothing could take that away. Big Tim already liked me and

Jason didn't hate me too much. I'd simply have to work on Bigger Tim, too.

I got out of the car and stared at my new home for the next week. The tour bus loomed over me, tall and black with flaming red highlights. And inside it were my rock heroes. The big red band name screamed to me in bold letters that were as tall as I was. "Fiery Boys!" it yelled. "Door's open; step right up."

I should have raced up the steps—I'd imagined doing it hundreds of times. But something held me back. Maybe I wanted to soak in this moment. I needed to remember, for the rest of my life, the day I first climbed on board. Or maybe I was worried that I would wash out. Bigger Tim's reticence certainly didn't help.

Whatever it was, I stood by the huge bus, unable to move. My heart pounded so hard that I thought everyone could see it beating, stretching away from my chest then snapping back like a cartoon character in love.

I had to admit the truth: I simply wasn't ready to meet them. Not that I'd ever be. My busy mind also wondered if I was even worthy. But I quickly told that part of me that I was at least as worthy as those groupies by the fence who, by the way, were now shouting derisive comments at me.

"Cheater! She doesn't deserve this."

"Why does she get a free pass?"

"Look! She's dressed like my mom."

That last one hurt. It was true, though. I had on modest light-green shorts, white sneakers, and a long gray blouse with a blue scarf. Sadly, I realized that I was dressed like that groupie's mother.

Kira had given me lectures about how to dress like a rock goddess. She had even given me some of her outfits, just in case the right opportunity came along. But I didn't

want to show up like that. And I certainly couldn't compete with the women at the fence for slut supremacy.

This moment of contemplation needed to end before the fans started to throw rotten food. So I stepped onto the bus, ready to meet my high school idols.

I had barely climbed the first step when I felt the difference. The interior of the bus was painted black. The afternoon sun might be bright outside, but in here, it was always night. The hidden cave of the Fiery Boys. Excellent!

I took another step and had to downgrade my "excellent" rating. The bus smelled bad. I could detect stale beer and male sweat, with a hint of marijuana. It reminded me of the boys' wing of my freshman year dormitory. Nothing I couldn't handle, of course, but my fantasies had imagined the Fiery Boys in a more elegant setting.

This shouldn't have come as a surprise. Did I think that any bus with four men living on it would be pleasant? Men are slobs. If it seemed like a dormitory, then perhaps it was. I certainly wasn't going to get bothered by that. And I couldn't let Big Tim down by making him lose the roadie pool. I'd had some fine times in dormitory rooms, and I was about to have some fine times here.

As if to confirm that fine times were indeed on their way, the first one suddenly materialized. I glanced up to see a bald head looking down at me. River! My heart jumped into my throat at this first encounter with a Fiery Boy, my favorite one, too. I felt a sense of kismet, a vision that we were destined to be together. And damn! He looked exceptionally hot in person. Hotter than that recent photo I'd seen. Mature, solid, and just plain perfect. A sharp frisson of excitement ran through my body.

River quickly turned and retreated into the bus, shouting, "It's Annalisa!" His footsteps pattered into the distance, and he was gone. That's okay, we'd get to know each other later.

I finished my ascent onto the bus and looked around. My eyes were already adjusted to the dark, crypt-like space. What I didn't expect to see was a continuation of the jarring color palette from the outside. Only a man would have decided to decorate the interior of a bus in black and fiery red. Only a man would want to live in there. The bus oozed sex and drugs and rock and roll.

Standing at the top of the steps, I found myself in a living room, with a sofa, table and chairs, and a wall-sized television tuned to a sports channel. Guitars sat by the wall along with cables and boxes of gear. The table was cluttered with beer and liquor bottles, a mostly empty bowl of snack food, and an ashtray with quite a few hand-rolled cigarette butts. Yeah, yeah, I knew they weren't cigarettes. So what?

River was gone, probably busy farther back, but Chuck was standing there, watching the screen, and Gabe was sitting at the table, buried in his phone. I took a moment to check them out. Even in the dim light, they looked so amazing that I wanted to jump like a teenager. In person, Chuck was even more handsome than he'd appeared on television. He wore tattered jeans and a T-shirt, with an unbuttoned long-sleeved black shirt over it.

And Gabe Ashford, my least favorite Fiery Boy, also looked better than I'd expected. He was actually rather cute, with a thin face, brown eyes, and spiky blond hair. His outfit was all black, including his jeans, his T-shirt, and even his leather biker's jacket. I'd never really paid much attention to him, but now I could see that I might have been wrong. Wow! It was a good thing River and Buck weren't there or I probably would have made inhuman noises and wet myself.

## **Eight**



It took me a few seconds to adjust to the reality of the situation. I was there! I was actually on the Fiery Boys tour bus, standing in front of them. Chuck and Gabe were right here. And River! I'd seen River already! Swoon! Somebody needed to pour a bucket of water on me.

Gabe cracked a smile, and the tension lifted. I could do this—it was new friend time. I stepped forward and offered my hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Gabe broadened his smile and shook my hand. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes, peeking every few seconds at his phone. He never said a word. Jason wasn't wrong there—the boy was a zombie. I wondered if he'd smoked all those joints.

Chuck came over to give me a hug. A hug! I was hugging one of the Fiery Boys! It didn't get any better than that. Or so I thought.

But when he opened his mouth, he ruined it all. "Welcome to the house of Chuck, now offering hot sex with the lead singer of the Fiery Boys." He grabbed his crotch and leered at me in a childlike way, as if a pre-teen was still in control of this man's body.

Jason had called that one, too. I mentally thanked him for warning me about this, otherwise I might have responded to Chuck's offer. Instead, I pulled out of his grip and smiled. "How about a tour of the bus?"

Chuck's eyes widened, clearly surprised at my response. "Of course. I'll show you the bedroom." Yeah, *that* was the

reason I didn't agree to instantly spread my legs for him. I'm one of those sensible women who need to make sure the bedroom's properly appointed before I let someone seduce me there. But I didn't want to get sarcastic with Chuck, so I let his understanding of the situation stand. As long as I got to see the tour bus I'd be happy. Baby steps.

Chuck snaked his arm around my shoulder and led me farther back. Just past the living room was the kitchen with a refrigerator, a stove, a sink full of dirty dishes, and an overflowing box of empty bottles on the floor.

Beyond the kitchen were the sleeping quarters with six cubicles stacked two high. Each had a bed and a few shelves for personal effects. The front part of the sleeping area had four cubicles, two on each side. Beyond that were two more on the left and the bathroom on the right. And at the very back sat the aforementioned bedroom.

Chuck pointed out which cubicles were for which band members. The two in back, across from the bathroom, had Buck on top and nobody in the bottom. The front four had River and Gabe on the right side, leaving Chuck and me on the left side. He gave me the upper cubicle and I wondered if he intentionally put my bed near his. Did he plan to visit me at night?

Chuck wrapped up the tour at the back of the bus. "And now the bedroom. I'm sure you'll like it." I felt like Chuck's new sex toy. And here I'd thought that none of them would want me. It was comforting to discover I'd been wrong, and yet a little disconcerting. I didn't want to shut the door completely on this man, but I simply couldn't bring myself to go there yet.

"Can we not do this right now?"

True to form, Chuck was unperturbed. "Some other time, then." I heard Jason's warning echo in my head, "Don't. Fuck. Chuck."

Then I reminded myself that this man was the lead singer of the Fiery Boys. That had to count for something. I wondered if I should go for it and make Kira proud. But Chuck's oversized ego was making it hard for me to feel any kind of special. I'd be just another conquest, along with thousands of other fan girls. And what would the rest of my week be like if I jumped him in the first ten minutes? Awkward. It didn't seem like the right thing to do.

So I gave him a friendly-but-not-too-friendly smile. "I'm guessing you were one of the three who *did* vote for me."

He stepped closer and ran his fingers through my hair. "Trust me, I want you on the bus. You're kinda cute." His hands slipped down to my shoulders then ran down my arms, thumbs extended to "accidentally" swipe my breasts as he made his way down to my hips. Jeez, what a lecher.

But honestly, did I think I would be treated differently than all the other groupies? As far as the Fiery Boys were concerned, I was no different than them. Just another woman who couldn't wait to have sex with a rocker. But I was here for a full week, not a half hour, and that should have meant something.

If Chuck had treated me as anything more than an easy lay, had shown even the tiniest morsel of respect for me as a person, I might have ripped my clothes off by now. And if River had come on to me, we'd both be naked. I'm only human, you know.

But Chuck simply wasn't motivating me. And it only got worse.

"Tell you what. . ." I could see by the glint in his eye that another attempt at my body was imminent. "Any time I'm in

the bedroom with my groupies, you're welcome to come join us. Three-way, four-way, I don't care. I'll make room for you, too."

This was offensive in so many ways that I couldn't even focus my reaction. Why did he think I'd group-fuck him after I'd just refused his attempt for some one-on-one action? Should I sarcastically thank him for inviting me to take part in sloppy thirds or fourths? I silently begged whatever deity was available to make Chuck stop talking about sex.

Too bad none of the gods were listening. Chuck wrapped his arms around me and crushed my body against his. Pressed up like this, I couldn't deny that he was a fine specimen. His tall, solid, muscular body felt wonderful. No wonder he didn't know how to talk to women—he didn't have to.

I hated to disappoint him, but I needed to. And besides, Jason would throw me off the bus if I let Chuck have his way. I pulled back and shook my head. "No, thanks." Before Chuck could continue his attack, I steered the conversation away from his penis. "So where did River go? And where's Buck? Is he sleeping in the bedroom?" Seriously, where were my two favorite Fiery Boys?

Chuck laughed. "Sleeping? No. Nobody sleeps in the bedroom. We do other things there. Things we can't do in our cubicles unless we want to end up in traction." He wiggled his eyebrows at me as if his meaning wasn't already glaringly obvious. Subtlety was not Chuck's forte.

"Nobody's in the bedroom. Yet. Here, I'll show you." He opened the door at the back of the bus and led me in. I stood there, amazed.

Besides being spacious, this room was like a portal to a different world. In direct contrast to the heavy black-andred motif on every surface of the bus, the bedroom was a welcome relief. The walls were a gentle off-white, the carpet light blue. Even the furniture was tastefully simple: plain nightstands and a solid wood headboard on a huge bed. I nodded my appreciation then headed out to the safety of the hallway.

In an effort to escape Chuck's horniness, I went to my cubicle to unpack. But he wasn't done with me yet. He pulled me to his side. "You want to see Buck? Check this out." He knocked on the bathroom door and shouted into it. "You ready?"

Ready? What was Buck doing in the bathroom? Another setup from the oversexed Fiery Boys? But this time, the man in question was Buck, my number two heartthrob. If he came out of the bathroom and propositioned me, I wasn't sure I'd be able to refuse.

The door opened and instead of the handsome Buck Morris, a naked woman stepped out. I was so surprised to see her that my whole body snapped to attention. There I was, mentally prepared to meet a rock icon only to come face-to-face with a naked groupie. This bus was full of surprises.

But the woman was far from surprised. She seemed to be completely at ease with her lack of clothing, and given her shapely body, I could see why. She fell easily into Chuck's arms, then she noticed me. "Contest girl." She laughed and kissed Chuck hard. Then she turned back to me with a smirk. "You lose."

As if. She could have him. I took a step back, ready to return to the living room.

But Chuck had a surprise in store for both of us. He peeled the woman away from himself and pointed to Buck's cubicle, whispering, "He's in there, and he wants you."

One rock star was clearly as good as another to this woman. And I couldn't completely disagree with that sentiment at this point in my new role as a band-sanctioned groupie. So it didn't surprise me when she scampered up the ladder.

There was a rustling sound followed by the woman's cooing. "Hi, Buck. Let me help you out of those pants."

From inside the cubicle, Buck shouted, "What? Stop that! Get out!" The rustling turned into jostling and the woman reemerged, pushed out by a strong arm.

She managed to grab the edge and lowered herself safely to the floor. Then she turned to Chuck without the slightest indication that it bothered her to have been thrown out of a man's bed. "I don't think he wants me," she giggled.

Chuck patted her naked backside. "Don't you worry about a thing. I want you. Go back to the bedroom, and I'll be there soon." She eagerly bounced through the door and disappeared.

Instead of following her, Chuck turned to me with one last attempt at what he seemed to call romance. "Join us, contest girl. The beast between my legs wants you." God, what a dick. And I didn't mean the beast between his legs.

My answer was still "no." As much as I wanted to pursue a fiery life, I definitely didn't want a fiery crotch. "Maybe another time. Go ahead and have fun."

Chuck gave me a mock salute and headed toward the bedroom. As he passed Buck's cubicle, a fist shot out, hitting his shoulder and knocking him against the bathroom door. Then the curtains flew open, and Buck leapt out, wearing boxer briefs and a black T-shirt. I stood in awe.

#### 60 Sage Ardman

Buck had always seemed like a gorgeous man to me, but that was back when I was looking through teenage goggles. Now that we were older, Buck looked even better than he had ten years ago. According to their bios, he was an inch shorter than Chuck, but I could hardly tell the difference. He was certainly much more solidly built and more muscular—I could see his entire body primed and flexed as he held Chuck against the wall. So handsome, so sexy. What a delightful first impression of the man: his pants off, his muscles toned.

Unfortunately, Buck didn't seem delighted at all. He didn't even notice me—he was focused entirely on Chuck. "Could you be any more of an asshole?" He glared with hard, venomous eyes.

Chuck laughed. "Why sure. Find a few more groupies and send them back here. And make sure they bring some tequila." He grinned at Buck then shook free of his bandmate's grip. "Chip!" he shouted toward the front of the bus. "Little help, please." I didn't know who Chip was: the only one up front was Gabe. Before I could inquire, Chuck disappeared into the bedroom.

"Fucker," Buck muttered and flipped a finger in Chuck's direction. He stood with his back to me, facing the bedroom, seething. Jason had called this one, too. Anger and hatred poured from Buck, and it touched a sensitive spot in me. Just like Palmer, who easily got angry, Buck was disturbingly touchy. Sure, Chuck had just played a prank on him, but most guys I knew laughed off that sort of thing.

After a few seconds, Buck started to climb back into his cubicle. Then he noticed me and stopped. After staring for a second, he shot out a short laugh. "Welcome to hell." With a shake of his head, he finished climbing into his cubicle and closed the curtain.

## **Nine**



I stood alone in the back of the bus, relieved to be free of that scene but concerned about what might come next. I had now met all four Fiery Boys, and they were certainly a letdown. Chuck and Gabe were, if anything, even more worthless than Jason had warned. River was obviously hiding from me, and Buck had emerged long enough to fight with Chuck then go back to into hiding as well. I might have once dreamed about Buck, but his anger doused that flame. He could stay in his cubicle for all I cared.

I noticed muffled giggles of delight coming from the bedroom door. That groupie might not have any shame about running around the tour bus naked and jumping into multiple band members' beds, but I felt a little embarrassed listening to her. I went back to the living room.

Gabe was still there, now working both a phone and a tablet. He didn't look up when I sat down across from him, and I felt alone again, even sitting with the famous guitarist. Sure, they had better things to do than talk to me all day—I could handle that. But the band had barely acknowledged me. Only Chuck seemed pleased to see me, and his pleasure extended only as far as his groin.

After a few more seconds of silent treatment, I decided to regroup. I muttered at Gabe, not expecting him to hear me. "Well this sucks." Then I stood up and got off the bus.

I was about to call Kira and tell her what a bunch of jerks these boys were, when Gabe came bounding out. I

watched carefully, wondering what had motivated the zombie to move his body. Probably hungry for some brains.

Gabe walked up to me with a tiny smile. He seemed about to speak when he noticed the women standing by the fence and stopped with an exasperated look. He raised a finger at me and leaned closer. "Don't go anywhere."

He walked to the fence, slowly pacing the line. I couldn't blame him, really. These women had everything on display. And Gabe, the reputedly horny member of the band, was definitely shopping. After a few seconds, he pointed to two tall women standing next to each other. "You two. Come on in." He nodded to Bigger Tim.

The security chief flashed him a grin. "Sure thing, Chip." Gabe darkened and folded his arms, apparently unhappy with this nickname. Bigger Tim just shrugged. When he opened the fence, the two women came screaming in, surrounding Gabe with a well-rehearsed coordinated grope.

Being this close to the Fiery Boys was eye-openingthey were jerks and whores. Did Gabe want me to stick around for an even more epic sexual encounter? Besides, where would the four of us go, now that the bedroom was in use? I felt slightly sick when I considered that the Fiery Boys might pile in there with as many hot bodies as the room could hold. No wonder Bigger Tim was reluctant to let me get on the bus right now: it was orgy hour.

I took a few steps back, hoping to avoid a messy situation. But then Gabe did something I didn't expect. He pushed the two women away. "Not me, girls. Chuck's looking for some fun. He's in the back of the bus with someone already. If you're interested in a four-way, go on in. If not, back to the fence." He pointed out the only two

directions they could take. Both of the women instantly ran for the bus.

As much as I was relieved to be free of a six-way with two band members, I was still disappointed and needed some space. I turned and escaped through the fence, moving it aside without Bigger Tim's help. Then I stepped through the crowd of waiting groupies. One or two of them probably yelled something derisive at me, but by that point, I'd heard it all and was tired of listening.

Big Tim should have left his bet at two days, because I might not last a week at this rate. I shuddered at the thought of even one day watching zombie-Gabe wake up long enough to arrange sexual liaisons for Chuck before returning to his coffin. At least he didn't try to get me to join in Chuck's orgy. I reached for my phone again, ready to disappoint Kira with the sordid news.

Behind my back, screams started up. "Gabe! Here! We love you!" Was he pimping again, choosing mates for the others? Or did Chuck need more than three? I wondered if the zombie guitarist had any libido of his own.

As much as I didn't want to watch any more of this, I couldn't resist turning to look. After all, my girlfriends needed to hear the full story of fiery depravity. Also, the sound of the fans screaming seemed to be growing louder.

What I saw behind me forced me to a stop. Gabe had also left the fenced enclosure and was headed straight for me, pushing women away as he approached. When he saw that I'd stopped, he jogged and quickly made it to my side. "Annalisa, wait. Let's talk." Fans surrounded us and pushed pieces of paper at him.

After signing a few autographs, he took my arm. "Let's get inside the fence."

#### 64 Sage Ardman

Now my least favorite Fiery Boy was chasing me. What unseemly sexual role did he have in mind? I nearly laughed when I thought of all the erotic fantasies I'd envisioned over the past month, and how they'd all been dashed in such a short amount of time. See? I knew I wasn't going to end up with any of them.

He led me back through the fence where we could talk in private. "How come everyone calls you Chip?" I gave him a light smile.

Gabe let out a laugh. "I just picked up that stupid nickname yesterday, and already everyone's using it. Please call me Gabe."

"Okay, Gabe." I paused before asking, but I couldn't resist, so I let it out. "Do you often choose partners for the other band members?" Like—I hoped—River? I still held on to some erotic fantasies, but they were fading fast.

Gabe gave me a mildly self-deprecating smile. "Not too often, and only for Chuck." He shrugged. "A happy lead singer makes a happy band."

"That's disgusting." The time for discretion and politeness was gone. "I definitely liked you boys better before I stepped onto that bus." Someone needed to hear this, and although Gabe might not remember anything I said, I still had to say it before his deadened nervous system stopped comprehending language completely.

Once again, he surprised me. "You've got it wrong, Annalisa. I'm not trying to convince you to go with Chuck. In fact, I was impressed with how you kept your distance from him just now. I only want to apologize. And try to explain. Come on, let's talk."

I stood with my mouth wide open, unsure I'd heard him right. I mean, that was an awful lot of words, and nice ones,

too. I didn't think he could do that. A sensitive Fiery Boyhe had my complete attention.

"Okay, sure."

"Let's go backstage." He pointed to the massive arena, sitting innocently like a citadel that had admitted the Trojan horse and had no idea what would happen when the sun went down. Backstage with Gabe sounded like fun. It had all the promise of rock and roll with the added attraction of a Fiery Boy who was willing to pay attention to me. Chuck needed to take lessons from this man.

I followed him, unable to resist further inquiry into the way I'd been treated. "Do you guys hate me or something? Am I ruining your all-guy bus experience? Because I can get a motel, you know—Jason said so. Just say the word and I'll go." At this point, I wouldn't mind.

Gabe held up a hand to stop me. "No, don't go. Not the best way to meet the band, though." He led me to a side door, and a guard let us in. "Come on."

I followed him to the stage, which was getting piled high with speakers and other band equipment. Gabe was about to head backstage when he muttered, "Oh, no," and ran up to a roadie. "I told you not to change the battery in my pedals." He knelt down with a groan and started to play with some equipment. After a few seconds, he looked up and explained it to me. "My programming got lost. I have to reload it-hang on." He worked for a minute to restore order, using two phones and assorted hardware that magically appeared from his pockets. Then he got up, and we started to walk away. "Okay, sorry about that."

I looked back at the guitar pedals on the floor, now flashing little green lights to tell the world that all was well. "High-tech band toys?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I'm a sucker for the stuff." He led the way back to a dressing room, sat down, and motioned for me to take another seat.

Gabe leaned close. "As I was starting to say before, nobody's mad at you. It's us. Not all of us are happy to be back on the road, and some of us don't even want to see each other. We're a pretty dysfunctional band."

"Then why are you touring?"

He grinned. "For fame and money, of course. I've got a high-tech toy habit that I'd like to feed. River wants to buy more fancy Japanese drums. And Chuck wants to give his Vegas act a boost. So when Jason suggested a ten-year reunion tour, we mostly agreed."

"Mostly? You didn't mention why Buck's back on tour."

"Yeah, he's the only one who didn't want this. We had to talk him into it." Gabe took a long breath. "Anyway, it hasn't been the smoothest ride, so I doubt we'll do anything else after this tour."

Oh no! Their reunion was a sham, and the band would soon be dead again. "I guess I'm sorry to hear that. I imagined the Fiery Boys would stay together and make lots more music." A laugh escaped from me. "Nothing's what I expected. I didn't expect to see orgies, either. Didn't that go out with the sixties?"

Gabe rolled his eyes. "Chuck's the only one who likes to have his groupies in groups."

"So why do you enable him? Can't Chuck find his own women? Maybe he needs a take-a-number dispenser." I pretended I was Chuck, selecting my next faceless female. "Number eighty-seven? Come on back and spread your legs."

Gabe laughed. "Just let it go."

"I can't, Gabe. You're like a predatory fraternity. It's offensive, sickening."

"I told you. It's only Chuck."

"Fine. So why am I getting the silent treatment from everyone else?"

"River hasn't got much to say to you—give him time. And I'm here, aren't I? Talking to you." He reached out and took my hands in his. "Don't leave. We want you on the bus. Well, I do at least. And I know River wants you there, too."

River wanted me? That was good news. But why did he run away as soon as I showed up? I pulled my hands back and sunk into the chair. "He certainly has a strange way of showing it. And what about Buck?"

"Buck wants you there, too. Although he also has a strange way of showing it. Besides not wanting to be on tour, he's going through some evil shit because of his divorce from Danielle. So don't take it personally."

"There's a lot of sexual pressure on that bus." I wondered why this would surprise me. It really shouldn't have.

"Again, that's Chuck-ignore him. I promise that the rest of us will treat you with respect." He stood up with his hand outstretched. "Come on. Let me help you get settled on the bus. In a few hours, we're doing a sound check, then we'll all have dinner and do a show. This is the first concert where you're with us, so it's going to be special."

I doubted the concert would be special for them. But I couldn't deny my own enthusiasm about standing in the wings while the Fiery Boys played to a huge Chicago crowd. And I did feel special when Gabe escorted me back to the bus, past vitriolic groupies who screamed their love for him and their hate for me with equal volume. Some of them needed to get a life, and all of them needed to put on more clothes.

Back on the bus, River and Buck were still hiding in their cubicles. Gabe walked me back there and demanded that they act nicely. Which, to my surprise, they did. They opened their curtains and welcomed me to the tour.

With the two most drool-worthy Fiery Boys smiling at me and acting nice, I gushed like a groupie. "Oh my God! I can't tell you how excited I am to meet you. I've been in love with you guys since high school." I bounced on the balls of my feet.

River gave me a light smile. "Well, I hope you enjoy this week"

Buck was a different story. He rolled his eyes and shook his head, then, without another word, he pulled back into his cubicle and closed the curtain.

Gabe smirked at Buck's reaction, then he led me back to the living room table. "You have to forgive Buck. He hates groupies, so when you went all fan girl on him just now, it annoyed him."

That made sense. Buck's father, Wyatt Morris, was also a famous rocker. So I could understand Buck's dislike of desperate fans. I respected his desire to be treated like a human being, and I promised myself I'd act normally to all of them from now on. It wouldn't be hard with Buck: I'd just pretend that he was another one of my angry boyfriends.

Gabe and I sat in the living room and maintained a steady conversation. It helped drown out the sound of three women screaming for Chuck's rosy ass. Swear to God, I actually heard one of them say that.

## Ten



"So are you getting any?" Jo wanted a body count.

I was standing in the wings of the stage, talking to her on my phone while trying to keep out of the way of roadies, techies, suits, and other symbiotic creatures from the world of rock-and-roll. Tonight I wore something more appropriate for the Fiery Boys: a black blouse with swirling magenta and blue leggings and a slate blue hoodie. I purposely kept it band-moderate so Chuck wouldn't get going again.

Fans were filing into the arena, and the show would be starting soon. The boys buzzed around with an extra level of energy, clearly ready to rock.

I retreated into a quiet corner of the wing so I could talk. "I'm lucky to still be on the bus. The Fiery Boys are not what I expected."

"No naked flesh?" Jo sounded disappointed.

"There was a naked groupie in the bathroom when I arrived. Does that count?"

"Not unless you had sex with her." She paused, then went on in a provocative pout. "Did you have sex with her?"

"Sorry, no." I was doing a poor job of delivering vicarious Fiery Boys thrills. Jo and Kira were two horny women who needed details.

She pressed on. "So you didn't have sex with anyone, but there was a naked groupie on the bus. Did *she* have sex with anyone?"

"Yep. Guess who with? Your favorite Fiery Boy, Chuck! He seems to enjoy group sex." I couldn't resist teasing her. "Maybe you and Kira could do him as a team."

Jo gasped. "Seriously? That'd be hella hot! Can you set this up for us?"

Okay, I didn't see that coming. I thought Jo would go prudish and proper. After all, she was a professional woman —a psychologist with an office and a receptionist and clients who paid for her good sense. Sure, she talked about sex all the time, but I didn't think she'd instantly be willing to team fuck Chuck. Was I the only woman in the world who didn't offer up her body as soon as he came close? Sheesh!

But before I promised any arrangements with the lead singer of the Fiery Boys, I felt like I needed permission from someone else. "Shouldn't we ask Kira first?"

Jo laughed. "No need. She's down with it. We've done it before. Remember that time the three of us went to Los Angeles for the weekend and you caught a cold? Well, Kira and I..."

"Stop!" I'd heard only vague moans of satisfaction from them that weekend, but they never admitted they'd been with the same man. In any case, I didn't need to hear about it now. Perhaps I was the only woman in the world who wouldn't fuck Chuck. I was also—let me point out—the only woman in the world who'd been warned not to. It was good to have an excuse for avoiding those things your gut tells you are wrong.

A tech wandered by with a clipboard. As he came close, the radio on his hip squawked that the show was all set up. "Hey, Jo. The show's starting soon, so I'm going to go. I'm really stoked!"

"Go get 'em, you lucky dog. Talk to you later." She hung up.

I noticed the band gathered together over by the side, so I approached with caution. The boys were all dressed up and looked quite fine. Chuck still wore tattered jeans and an unbuttoned long-sleeve shirt, but now he didn't have a T-shirt under it, and his bare chest flashed all kinds of desire. River was down to jeans and a sleeveless white Tshirt with a black leather vest over it. His shoulder muscles alone made my knees weak.

Buck and Gabe were much more dressed up. Buck wore black slacks and a black jacket over an untucked white shirt with the top button open and a loose white tie. The sleeves of his shirt and jacket were rolled up like a businessman on the Wall Street trading floor. And Gabe was looking the most impressive, with black pants, black calf-boots, and a black Nehru jacket with two rows of gold buttons marching down the front. The boys looked hot and ready to rock.

Gabe nodded at me and they all turned to look, so I smiled bashfully and gave them a thumbs up. Regardless of their personal issues, they were still my favorite band of all time, and I wanted to show them that I was good. If it made a difference to anyone, that is.

Nobody said a word, but Chuck blew me a kiss by way of reply. Gabe and Buck fidgeted with their guitars while River casually tossed drumsticks from hand to hand. I took a step back to give them space.

Jason paced back and forth by the edge of the stage, peeking out every minute to check on the audience. Each time he looked. Chuck would ask if it was time to start the show. He really was a child, complete with are-we-there-yet nagging. Like a patient parent, Jason set his hand on Chuck's shoulder. "Wait for it. I figure ten more minutes."

#### 72 Sage Ardman

Jason might not like having me there, but he had at least been civil to me, so I felt like I could talk to him. "How do you know when it's time to start the show?"

He grinned. "I like to wait for it to get restless and loud. Right now, it's a bit too quiet for my boys."

"Your boys?" There was that swagger again, his I-am-God attitude.

Gabe laughed. "We're back under contract, so he owns us until the tour ends."

River nodded. "Chip's right, you know." Gabe puffed out a breath at River's use of the nickname. Of course, he wasn't the only one whose identity was fluid. River had a fake last name, and Buck used to be called Chuck. Nobody was who they seemed.

River continued, oozing sarcasm. "We're Jason's indentured servants now, forced to play for our lord and master."

Buck joined right in, bowing to Jason. "My lord and master."

"You're making nice money, Buck."

"I have money." He growled. "Can't stand this fucking tour." He stomped away. I let my shoulders slump and backed away in the other direction. No need to make them any more testy before the show.

Ten minutes later, as predicted, Jason took a quick peek and then spoke into his phone. He turned to the band with a nod. Like puppets on a string, the boys became animated by their manager's signal. They straightened up, excited and ready.

A voice boomed through the hall. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome." The announcer gave a lecture about recording, smoking, throwing things, and all the other uncivilized activities that they hoped they could count on

the audience not to do. Then, with the fans whipped into a delirium, he wrapped up his introduction. "Let's give a big Chicago welcome to the Fiery Boys!"

The house lights went down, the stage lights went wild, and the crowd went wilder. The boys marched onto the stage.

Chuck grabbed the microphone and did his best to own the crowd. "Hello Chicago! Are you ready to rock?" River clicked his sticks together, and the band seamlessly launched into their first song, an old chestnut called "Sizzling Love."

I had always liked this song, with its powerful beat and soulful lyrics. It had been rerecorded recently and popularized by Alejandro, the rocker whose T-shirt Big Tim was wearing when he picked me up. There was definitely some crossover between the two bands. I'd even heard a rumor that they were planning on trading guest appearances when their tours intersected in Seattle. Too bad I'd be gone by then.

I felt woozy, standing in the wings and watching them play. No fan could get any closer. Gabe stood nearest to me in his power-zombie stance, legs apart, head thrown back, eyes closed. River thrashed the drums like a mad man, a smile on his face that left little doubt he was enjoying every second. Chuck howled and growled as he postured for his fans, clearly happy to be the center of attention. Even Buck seemed pleased, standing near the drum kit and bobbing his head. He and River occasionally traded hand signals and nods, keeping the rhythm section solid.

And me? I let it all go and rocked out. This decade-old song brought back so many memories—I was transported. My body moved without thinking about it. I wanted to let go completely and dance with abandon. Unfortunately,

there was too much activity going on back stage, and I didn't want to get in anyone's way. But down on the dance floor, everyone was having a blast. I realized that I needed to join the rest of the fans out there. Then I wouldn't have to worry about anyone else.

I hid my backstage pass and went down to the floor. The music was thumping even louder as I made my way in from the wings. I found a nice spot and started to dance, blending with pumped fans who were totally into this song. Gabe improvised a little, and each deviation from the overplayed studio version elicited a cheer. I took a few seconds to appreciate that I was at my first Fiery Boys concert in years. The energy was overwhelming.

After the song ended, I checked out the crowd. One woman was instantly noticeable because she was tall and had long, bright red hair that spilled over bare shoulders. She stood by the edge of the stage, as close as possible to Chuck. All around her were other women who also had artificially red hair, but this fan distinguished herself with her height and the furious energy she brought to her dancing when the next song started. Curious, I worked my way toward her.

As I approached, I could see more of her outfit. She wore some sort of red corset that had flame-shaped pieces of leather rising up all around her body. Two of the flames conveniently managed to provide minimum legal coverage of her breasts while revealing most of their obviously enhanced ginormousness. I gasped and stared.

Now I knew what it meant to be a serious Fiery Boys fan. Compared to this woman, I was nothing, a mere poser. She was completely out there, living the life. I was impressed. I inched my way closer, fascinated with the scene.

As I got nearer, I could see more of this fan girl's true dedication to her obvious goal of seducing the Fiery Boys. The bottom of her tight red corset had inverted flames, hanging down below her waist. The thin leather tendrils didn't even pretend to cover anything and left her backside completely exposed. Once again, she remained minimally covered thanks to one particularly long lick of leather flame that snaked down between her legs and reappeared as a thong string in back. She topped this incredibly erotic getup with some thigh-high fuck-me boots, red of course, with towering heels. That explained her height. Her outfit was so powerfully kinky that I doubted she could be more alluring, even if she was naked. This was finely tuned slutwear. Chuck really needed to invite her back to the bus.

"Hey! It's the contest girl. That bitch!" I wondered when someone would recognize me. Too bad it was one of the red-headed friends of the corseted queen. Their leather leader turned, noticed me, and waved a hand. Then, like a bacteria absorbing nutrients, the perimeter of women surrounding her opened up, and I was brought in. I stood face to face with the kinkiest groupie I'd ever seen.

Whoever she was, she didn't seem happy. "Well, if it isn't the contest whore. How's the bus, bitch? Fucked Chuck yet?" She had to yell to be heard over the pounding music.

I shouted back a reply. "No, I think he's more your speed." I wanted to suggest that we just ask him. After all, he was standing right in front of us on the stage. I glanced up and saw his eyes on the two of us, watching us carefully. Of course, when I looked again I realized that he was watching her carefully, not me. I couldn't blame him.

The song ended and in the relative silence, the queen bee lashed out at me. "I hope you die!"

#### 76 Sage Ardman

It's always nice to know where you stand when meeting new people. And in the case of this woman, I stood in a very difficult place. I needed to say something in response to her death threat, so I tossed back a light quip. "Why? Are you second in line?" I gave her a little grin.

She didn't even crack a smile. In fact, her frown only deepened. Okay, fine. Humor wasn't going to work here, so I went for flattery, something that she seemed to desperately want. I stepped back and gave her an approving nod. "Honestly, you look super hot! I've got to tell you how impressed I am with your outfit. Chuck will love it—I'm sure he'll fuck you."

She practically snarled at me. "You stupid cunt! I've fucked him plenty of times." Why was I not surprised?

"Well then, you're way ahead of me. Look, don't let me stop you from doing him here in Chicago or anytime I'm on the bus. I promise I won't get in your way." I can be quite accommodating when I try.

But it didn't work. She clenched her fists and seemed to tighten every muscle in her body. I couldn't win with this one, so I decided it was time to make myself scarce. But before I could move, she hauled off and slapped me across the face. Really hard! Then, just in case I had forgotten her earlier death threat or had otherwise thought we were becoming fast friends, she screamed, "Die!"

I got the message. Loud and clear and ringing in my head from that slap. I turned and charged the queen's guard, ducking between two of them to get out into the crowd. Keeping low, I pushed people aside, my head down, my arms in front of me.

I made it to the edge of the dance floor and followed signs for the bathroom. When I got there, I examined myself and could see a red area where my cheek felt warm. No broken skin. I was also pleased to note that she hadn't injected any toxic biochemicals into me with micro needles implanted in her fingernails. Hey, it's a sick world out there, and my overactive brain likes to drift.

I took a slow breath and calmed myself down. Disappointed, I realized that I now had to watch the shows from the wings, not the audience. I was the famous contest winner, and the other fans were not my friends. I headed backstage.

It took me a few minutes of wandering around the wings until I found a place where I could dance without bothering anyone. From there, I had a great side view and nobody yelled at me. Thirty feet away, my rock heroes were pounding out a more recent song, one that Buck wrote. I swayed, entranced by this so, so pretty song, enjoying the thrill of seeing the Fiery Boys play it. They were right there, so close, and I felt like they were playing only for me. I had to admit this was better than being on the dance floor.

After another few songs, they finally played "Fiery Life," and I nearly lost control. I danced much more intensely, flailing my arms in the air and singing along at the top of my lungs.

A pair of panties flew onto the stage, landing at Chuck's feet. He scooped them up and turned to hook them over the end of Buck's bass guitar. Although the fans cheered at the gesture, Buck was not amused. He kicked Chuck and knocked him off balance.

The next verse was up, and Chuck was already singing the lyrics. Ever the professional, he kept going while he stumbled, which elicited applause from the audience. Then he straightened himself at the front of the stage and finished the song as if nothing had happened.

#### 78 Sage Ardman

Angry Buck again. He didn't need to react so strongly to what seemed to me like classic playfulness. Women must throw their undergarments at these four men all the time—what part of that was bothersome? And it's not like Chuck had laid the panties over the strings or otherwise affected Buck's playing. Interestingly, I noticed River give Buck an approving smirk. Was he angry with Chuck, too? Jeez, they were as bad as Palmer.

I was so tired of angry men. All that mattered was their petty grievances. I wondered if they were this childish ten years ago, when they really were children.

### Eleven



After the show, the boys made their way to the bus. I followed at a distance, unwilling to get caught in their band hell or the backwash of stage door groupies. I waited for the four of them to climb on board before I came out of hiding and ran to the bus.

The locker-room odor now overpowered the smell of beer and pot. The bus simply stank. I saw River duck into the bathroom, a towel around his narrow waist. Buck and Gabe were collapsed at the living room table, while Chuck could be heard from the bedroom along with some number of women.

I sat at the living room table and tried to make conversation. "You were wonderful tonight."

"Thanks." Gabe smiled and lit a joint. He took a deep drag, then held it out to Buck. I noticed a moment of hesitation before Buck took the joint and puffed on it. Then he handed it back to Gabe and wandered to his cubicle. Gabe watched him leave the living room and laughed. "Lightweight." He held the joint out to me.

I considered his offer. It's not like I'd never gotten high before, and Gabe was really my only friend in the band. But I was still high from my first night with the Fiery Boys, so I didn't need to get any higher. I waved my hands to decline.

But before he sank into total oblivion, I decided to ask about the scantily clad leather fan girl, screaming for my blood. "Hey, Gabe, this may be a stupid question, but did

you notice that woman in the front wearing a skimpy red corset?"

Gabe laughed. "You're right, that is a stupid question." He took another drag and held it for a few seconds before exhaling. "She's a Vegas showgirl. Her real name is Mary, but she calls herself 'Inferna.' Nice Fiery Boys name, huh? She runs a popular website and claims to be our biggest fan."

"So that's Inferna." I'd heard her name before, and I'd read her blog. One of my biggest haters, as far as I could remember. And I understood why, too. I was a major threat to her reputation as the best Fiery Boys fan ever.

Gabe nodded. "She drives from city to city, gathers a crew, and monopolizes the front of the dance floor." He frowned. "I saw what happened tonight. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I laughed. "She claims to have bedded Chuck lots of times."

"Yep. They go way back. Chuck lives in Vegas, too, so they're fuck buddies. And she has visited the bus a few times since we started this tour. Chuck thinks she's a fine piece of ass."

"What about the rest of you? Have you had a tumble with the hot Inferna?"

Gabe shook his head. "Not me. I'm eternally amused by her outfits, but I'd never drop my pants anywhere near her." Aha! A rocker who was concerned about sexually transmitted diseases. How downright sensible.

Buck emerged from the back with a six-pack of beer and some bottles of soda. He set some of the drinks on the table while he dealt out the rest: beer for himself, another for me, and a soda for Gabe.

I took a sip. "What about you, Buck? Have you jumped the angry Inferna?" I wondered whether two angry people would make a good couple, or just a recipe for pain.

He winced and shook his head. "Not a chance." Make that two sensible rockers. Buck focused his attention on the bottle of beer and quickly finished it off.

As he opened his next bottle, I tried another approach. "I loved your music for 'Seattle Summer." That movie had been quite popular a few years ago, and I was surprised when I realized that he had written the music.

Buck raised an expressionless face at me and stared for a few seconds. Finally, he dropped his head and muttered, "Thanks." Still too much fan girl? This guy really hated praise.

Soon, River came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. I felt a sliver of excitement seeing my favorite musician nearly naked and standing so close. I wanted to give him a hug and maybe something else. Instead, I held back and tried to treat him normally. "You really love those drums, River." I didn't want to hear what he thought of Inferna.

River pulled up a chair and sat at the table, giving me a nod. "Yep." This rocker really didn't have much to say.

Buck handed him a bottle of soda water and started to work on his third beer. Gabe got up and headed for the shower.

I decided to venture back into conversation with the silent member of the band. "Soda water, River? I thought you were a beer drinker." Years ago, he did a series of beer ads. One particularly memorable picture showed him with a bottle in each hand, eyeing them thirstily. That's why they called him the hard-drinking drummer.

#### 82 Sage Ardman

River shook his head with a partial grin. "I'm trying to cut back." He picked up the water bottle and swallowed a huge gulp.

I turned back to Buck. "When do you get to take a shower?" I may have wiggled an eyebrow at the notion of Buck in a shower. But as soon as I'd done it, I realized it was exactly the sort of groupie-level thing he hated.

And I was right. Without saying a word, he got up from the table, wandered down the hall, and climbed into his cubicle. Buck and I were definitely not making any progress here.

River was the only one left at the table, which was fine by me. "I'm surprised Chuck doesn't want a shower before letting those groupies have his body."

River grinned. "Doesn't need to. Those girls will lick him clean."

My gut churned involuntarily, and I realized I was nowhere near the level of these groupies, blindly willing to engage in Chuck's twisted kink. I almost retched at the thought of licking whatever it was that was stinking up the bus.

And then things got worse. The bedroom door flew open, and Chuck stepped out, completely naked. From my seat in the living room, I could see more than I wanted to. I could see his excited state, which like the rest of him was tall and well built. I could also see two naked women hanging on his shoulders, and behind him, two more laying on the bed. These were not things I wanted to see.

Chuck bellowed out across the bus. "Annalisa! Join us. I've saved my thighs for you, girl! Lick me and then I'll lick you." And here I thought River was joking.

Any interest I may have had in Chuck's physique was instantly obliterated. How was it possible for any woman to

be so desperate for this man that she would overlook his smelly body and smellier attitude? River must have noticed my reaction because he burst out laughing. I needed to escape Chuck's pandering, so I got off the bus.

Standing outside in the fresh air, I took a few long breaths to purge my lungs. It didn't help. I flopped against the side of the bus with my head down and my hands on my knees.

"How did you like the show?" Jason was standing there, smoking a cigarette. He was talking about the music, of course, but I was thinking about a different show that I'd just seen.

"You were right about them. Chuck has got to be the biggest pig on the planet, River doesn't say much, and Buck gets upset by everything I do. Only Gabe is nice to me. Not what I expected."

"I warned you. But you said you wanted a fiery life, right? So get back in there and burn. Fifteen thousand women would trade their ovaries to be you right now."

"That's an unpleasant image. You actually think I can get along with these guys? How? By watching them screw and get drunk?"

He nodded at the beer in my hand. "You're already on your way. Have a few more with them, and they'll loosen up. Don't forget you won the contest because your photo screamed 'party girl."

"Don't give me that crap, Jason. You picked me because I'm ugly."

He held up his hands to ward off my anger. "I didn't pick you. Whine to your precious Fiery Boys."

"Yeah, like any of them cares about me." I shook my head in disgust. "It stinks in there. I needed some air."

"Want a motel room?"

#### 84 Sage Ardman

Motel rooms would be more pleasant, but they wouldn't solve the problem of getting along with these irascible band members. "That's okay, I'll ride on the bus. I just need some space right now. I don't know if I can listen to Chuck have sex for hours."

"Oh, don't worry. He'll be done soon."

"Seriously? I think he's got four women in there."

"Four tonight? Then he should be done very soon."

I winced. "You're not making this any easier, Jason."

"I told you Chuck was a train wreck. You seem to be able to resist his charm, so just get back in there. He'll probably stop bothering you if you say 'no' enough."

"Oh? Has any woman ever gotten away with saying 'no' to him?"

He laughed. "If so, I haven't heard about it." He draped an arm across my shoulder and pulled me close. "Why not come with me, and we'll get a drink somewhere?"

Oh, great! Now I had to worry about Jason, too. I could feel the veiled sexual heat coming from him, which made me tense. At least with the Fiery Boys, the sexuality was honest: either totally in my face or completely absent. But Jason was pretending to be friendly, and I knew better.

Interestingly, his leering was exactly what I needed to face the Fiery Boys again. It reminded me why I was there, which wasn't because of the band manager. I made my excuses and returned to the bus.

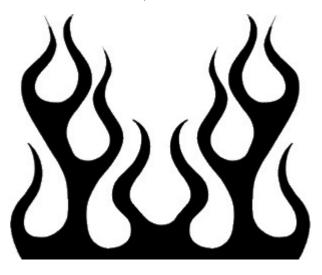
As I approached my cubicle, I was surprised to see Gabe standing in the hallway, completely naked. My first reaction was to be annoyed with another Fiery Boy who was using inappropriate seduction techniques. But Gabe was not Chuck—he had already established that. Instead, I realized that the tour bus was simply a boy's locker room. And since the bathroom and bedroom were often in use, the hallways

were the only place to get changed. Gabe rummaged through his clothes and started to get dressed without even noticing me. Although not my favorite band member, I couldn't deny that the boy was in good shape. Still, I waited until he was decent before I ventured down the hall.

After a long day, a strange introduction to the band, and an exciting show, I needed to relax. I unpacked my suitcase and headed to the bathroom to get washed up. While I was in there, I heard Chuck's party breaking up, with footsteps and women's voices. By the time I came out, the bedroom door was open and the only one left was Chuck, wrapped in a towel and waiting for his turn in the bathroom. I had to hand it to Jason—he certainly knew the Fiery Boys well.

The band was playing in Chicago again tomorrow night, so the boys stayed up late and partied. I sat with them for a while, but after too many come-ons from Chuck and too few words from nearly everyone else, I hid in my cubicle. I wasn't really tired, just tired of them. Eventually I fell asleep.

# Day Two



## **Twelve**



I woke up with a thrill at the realization that I had just spent the night on the Fiery Boys tour bus. Regardless of their personal issues, this was still the best vacation I'd ever taken. Also, the bus seemed to smell much better in the morning, but my nose was probably just numb. I got dressed and stepped outside for a breath of real air.

My girlfriends needed an update, so I called Kira. "Well?" She started right off. "Who did you sleep with last night?"

I couldn't resist the urge to tease her. "All five of us slept together."

"Yeah, bullshit. Jo gave me the dirt. I know you're not getting any from those boys."

"Hey! You should have won the contest. You'd have nailed Chuck by now."

"You mean Jo and I would have, right? You said he does groupies like potato chips, never satisfied with just one. She wants us to fly out there and jump him."

I laughed. "You guys are too much."

"No, it's Chuck who's too much. I saw pictures of him from last night's show. God, what a stud. Did you get to watch him up close?"

"Yep. I started in the audience, but the fans weren't too happy to see me."

"Uh huh. I read about that."

She did? I doubted that my visit to the audience last night was news. "You read about what?"

"Let's just say that there's a website out there that's not too sympathetic to you."

I knew exactly what she was talking about. "Inferna, right?"

"Yeah. And wow, does she ever hate you. The woman's nuts."

"I know. I met her last night. She slapped me and told me to die. So I get it. . . she's not my closest friend."

"She's obviously jealous. I'd avoid her if I were you. And don't read her website, please!"

Oh, now she tells me. I'd seen plenty of hate sites, including Inferna's. "I looked at her site once. Just the usual hate."

"It's not the usual hate anymore. Today she edited a picture of you so that you had nails through your eyes and blood running down your face. The girl's certifiable."

That stopped me. I mean, there are haters and then there are honest-to-God crazy people. Inferna might actually be mentally ill. "Wow."

Kira offered to help. "Tell you what. I'll watch her site and let you know if there's anything you need to see."

I took a long breath to purge Inferna's hate. "Okay, thanks."

"Hey, I've got an early meeting so I have to get going. But keep me posted. I'm totally proud of you for winning this contest."

I knew she was jealous, but it was nice to hear encouraging words occasionally. "Thanks, Kira." We hung up.

When I returned to the bus, Buck was in the kitchen, and Chuck was sitting at the living room table. I sat down at the table and he wiggled closer. "Good morning, cutie pie."

Cutie pie? Was he still trying to get me into the bedroom, or was this simply how he talked to all women? Either way, I wished he'd stop. "Save it for the groupies, Chuck. Inferna would kill for a piece of your ass."

"Inferna's already had a piece of my ass. What she'd kill for is week on the bus."

"Don't I know it. How long have you two been together?"

"We're not what you'd call 'together.' But I've known her —let's see—six years. Things only got weird recently when this reunion tour came through."

I wasn't feeling very generous, so I threw out a zinger. "I guess it was easier when you were a second-rate Vegas performer like her."

Buck's laughter filled the bus, and I could see him looking at me with what seemed like admiration. He kept laughing as he wandered back to his cubicle. It wasn't hard to please Buck—just help him bash Chuck.

And apparently, I'd done a good job of it. Chuck touched his finger to my hand and pulled it back quickly, making a hissing sound as if he'd been burned. "You've got a nasty little mouth there, contest girl." He frowned.

I suddenly felt bad for him, and I resolved to be nicer. "Sorry." I slumped my shoulders.

"Don't be sorry. You're right. She's bitter. I thought she was mad because she didn't win the contest, but I'm not so sure."

"Oh, I'm sure that's part of the reason. Maybe not the whole story. So tell me, did she just dye her hair red, or was it always that way?"

Chuck smirked. "Pretty obvious, huh? She dyed her hair and started her website when this whole reunion tour idea got going. The hair's kind of creepy, if you ask me."

"But not creepy enough to keep you away from her."

He shrugged. "Hey! She still has a great body. Why should I care if her hair looks like a circus clown?" Chuck turned in his seat to face me directly. "What I can't figure out is why you keep running away from me. Wasn't I your favorite Fiery Boy?"

"No, sorry."

"Let me guess. You were in love with Gabe."

"River."

"River? That guy's butt ugly."

So he hated Buck *and* River. Probably Gabe, too. "Why are you so nasty to your bandmates? You've already got nearly every fan girl in your camp. What more do you want?"

"I want you."

"Well, believe me, I'm honored. But you're kind of making me uncomfortable. Besides, you could have held onto those four groupies from last night."

Chuck shook his head. "I had them—last night. Now I want you." He squinted at me. "Is there nothing about me that appeals to you?"

What a fragile ego. I had to give him something. Chuck was, after all, the lead singer of the Fiery Boys—he deserved more than my disdain. And I'd gotten to the point where I wasn't bothered by his sexual advances anymore. I could talk to this man, perhaps even be his friend.

"I'm sorry for being rude. There *are* things about you that appeal to me. You're certainly good looking. You used to be too skinny for my taste, but ten years have filled you out nicely. I couldn't help but notice a fine physique when you were standing in the bedroom door naked last night." I grinned at him, and he shot it right back.

Before he could react to my statement with another sexual advance, I went on. "And second, I like the songs you wrote. Well, one of them, anyway."

Chuck brightened. "Which one?"

Before I could answer, River stumbled out to the living room wearing a bathrobe. "I know which one she likes." He plopped down at the table and gave me a smile that warmed me from the inside out. "Fiery Life,' right?"

Little parts of me were already starting to liquefy, and now I felt like I could melt into a puddle on the floor. River, my rock idol, was paying attention to me. I thought he was ignoring me, but now I knew that he wasn't. Maybe this week would bring us closer, after all. "Did Jason tell you?" I managed to ask in an almost normal voice.

"Nobody told me. I saw you dancing to it last night. Obviously your favorite." He noticed me? Now I was buzzing all over.

Chuck gave a little shrug. "Yeah, that song's okay."

River laughed. "Okay? It's one of our signature songs." He leaned closer to me. "Why do you like it?"

I was in heaven. River actually wanted to know about me. I felt so lightheaded that I gripped the table to keep from floating up into the air.

"That's my life Chuck wrote about." Thinking about my life back then took me down a little, but I couldn't keep any secrets from River. I smiled guiltily. "All of that actually happened to me."

Before anyone could ask *what* had happened to me, I explained it with the song's lyrics, growling it out the way Chuck did.

"The engine's rumble, the speed.

The drive to break out, the need.

The push to prove it, your creed."

River drummed the table with me. When we finished, Chuck smiled. "You can almost sing good."

I nearly laughed at the way he could make a compliment sound like an insult. Sure, I could carry a tune, but I was no Chuck. I ignored his dig and sang the song's chorus. Chuck joined in.

"Living by a precipice,

Dancing on the blade of a knife,

Liberty means so much more,

The promise, the promise of a fiery life."

We whooped together and gave each other a smile. "Anyway, that was Zed and me in high school." I sighed. "He liked fast cars and motorcycles. We rode them, souped them up, and even raced them. My dad had taught me a few basic car concepts like how to change the oil, but Zed taught me to get in there and really work the engines. I'm telling you, we lived a fiery life. We were totally in love."

Chuck nodded. "Did you get married?"

River rolled his eyes and swatted Chuck on the shoulder. "Moron. It's a sad song." He looked at me. "I'm guessing something happened to him. Did he die?"

I swallowed and nodded. "Two months before we graduated. Motorcycle accident on a windy road—just like in the song. Not only that, but when they found his music player, he'd been listening to 'Fiery Life' on endless repeat." I sang the second verse.

"The winding road draws your prowls, It grabs for your heart, and growls, With blood on its bed, it howls."

I pushed away the pain that always hit me when I heard those words. Not only did I lose Zed back then, so close to graduation, but my parents had already moved away. Zed's death left me even more alone.

I pulled myself together and dove into the second chorus. Each chorus was the same except for the last line, which followed the mood of the verse. So rather than repeat all of it, I sang only the last line.

"The sorrow of a fiery life."

River took my hand. "I'm sorry to hear that, Annalisa." I gasped silently-his comfort was so warm and perfect. Chuck may have written a beautifully poetic song, but River understood it. He understood me.

I smiled and looked at him. "It's all right. That song gave me the strength to put my life back together and move on."

The third verse was exactly what I'd needed to recover. Chuck sang it for me.

"Honor the fallen with depth,

Live and remember each death,

Burn the life bright with new breath."

I recited the final line of the third chorus, the line that got repeated a few times before the song ended.

"You owe yourself a fiery life."

I swallowed to push back a tear. "If it hadn't been for that song, I wouldn't have survived. 'Fiery Life' saved me."

Chuck beamed. "So if my song saved you, why don't you want to have sex with me?"

I gave him a doleful smile. He was right, of course: I would have let him seduce me because of that song. But I wasn't so sure anymore.

Before I could say anything, River reached across the table and punched him. Chuck glowered. "Hey! What was that for?"

"That's for being a pig." He punched Chuck again, harder. "And that's for calling me ugly."

#### 94 Sage Ardman

Oops. River must have been listening for a while if he'd heard Chuck call him ugly. And that meant he'd heard me when I'd admitted that he was my favorite Fiery Boy. Would he find that awkward?

Apparently not. River stood up and offered his hand to me. "I'm making breakfast. What would you like?"

Most excellent! I wanted one smoking Fiery Boy, hold the clothes. But I didn't want to come across like Chuck, drooling with every word. So I jumped to my feet and took River's hand. "I'll have whatever you're having." I managed to restrain myself from adding, "For the rest of my life."

### **Thirteen**



The second Chicago concert was hours away, and the boys had little to do. So they spent the afternoon in their usual pursuits: drinking, smoking, grumbling, staring into space, barely talking, and—in Chuck's case—chasing groupies. He found three women who were willing to share their favorite singer's naked body.

Later, I stood in the wings, nearly as excited as I'd been at the first concert. Feeling a little bolder than last night, I had on red leggings with a fitted black tank top and black ankle boots. Leggings worked well for me since I was so tall.

I took a minute to soak in my surroundings. Honestly, how amazing was it to be backstage at a Fiery Boys show every night? *Mega* amazing. Regardless of the way the band and the fans treated me, this was something I would never forget.

From the wings, I could see Inferna and her minions near the front of the audience again. I peeked at her but tried not to let her see me. Yep. Same skimpy corset tonight. Now here was someone who needed a pair of leggings.

The Fiery Boys did a great show. Already, the song list and Chuck's banter with the crowd were becoming familiar. He made the same jokes with the fans, and they loved it. I could see what a showman he was.

Everything was going well until they got to "Fiery Life." I had a copy of the set list tonight, so I knew it was up next. Even River gave me a wink, and we smiled at each other. But then Chuck went rogue.

"Hey there, Chicago. I'm sure you know about the contest where one lucky girl got to go on tour with us. Well she's here tonight, so I want you all to put your hands together and give a big Chicago welcome to Annalisa Ricci." He turned toward the wing and held out his arms. "Come on out here, Annalisa."

Before I could take a step toward the stage—or away from it, as my instinct suggested—a nasty jeering rose up from the audience. Women were booing me. Inferna and her besties were engaging in their usual mantra, shouting for my death, over and over. I felt like my boots had been superglued to the floor.

Chuck dropped his arms and laughed at the crowd. "Aw, now. Is that any way to show her how you feel? I'm hearing from a lot of girls, but what about you guys? Don't you want to see Annalisa?" The deeper bellow of male voices was more encouraging, although it still had a threatening ring to it. And the louder voices that could be heard above the clamor were all demanding pieces of my underwear or parts of my body.

Chuck tried to appeal to the men. "Hey, you saw that picture. This is a girl who can drink you under the table and spray you with beer while she does it. Be nice to her, or I'll have her come out and hose you all down."

Oh great! Did he really think that would help the audience's attitude? Because if he did, he was wrong. They just got louder.

But apparently Chuck wasn't done humiliating me. "And you girls out there don't have to worry about Annalisa. She's the first woman I've met who *doesn't* want to have sex with me."

The man had no sense in his head. Once again, his attempt to make the audience like me backfired. Now the

women's booing was louder than the male voices. I turned and ran.

I made it back to the bus as fast as I could and climbed into my cubicle. Safe behind the closed curtains, I let my tears fall.

What was wrong with Chuck? Why was he so dedicated to abusing me all the time? He'd seemed like he wanted to honor me at the show, but the way he went about it left me wondering. How could he be such a showman and yet be so clueless? And if he really was a fool, then how had he written "Fiery Life" and those other sensitive songs? That left me with only one conclusion: he hated me. Probably because I wouldn't have sex with him. I pulled the blanket tightly over myself and somehow fell asleep.

When the show was over, the band piled onto the bus. I awoke to the sound of groupies screaming for Chuck, the clacking of their heels mixing with the heavier stomping of male shoes. One woman's voice was familiar and aggressively unfriendly. "Where's the contest bitch?" Inferna was on the bus.

I shrank back in my cubicle and prayed she wouldn't find me. Of course, there was no chance of that—Inferna knew this bus as well as anyone. She drew back my curtain and glared at me. Two other women stood by her side. "Fucking-A, Chuck! You put her right above you?" She snarled at me. "You little whore."

Inferna had me at a distinct disadvantage, so I flattened myself against the back of my cubicle, as far from her as I could get. If we'd been standing in an open space, I might have said something, engaged her in some way. But I was trapped in there, vulnerable, afraid, and no doubt showing it. All the power was hers.

#### 98 Sage Ardman

She hissed at me through clenched teeth. When she reached toward me, I grabbed my backpack to use as a shield. If necessary, I'd swing it at her, although I knew it wouldn't be very effective—my purse and a change of clothes were the only things in it. After last night, I'd decided to stay lightly packed at all times in case of trouble. Trouble like this.

Before Inferna and I could come to blows, Chuck intervened. Chuck! The last person I expected to help me was suddenly my savior. "Leave her alone." He pulled my nemesis away and motioned toward the bedroom. "Go on, now. I'll be right there." Inferna sent the other women back. Then, still standing in the hallway next to my cubicle, she pulled Chuck in for a kiss. He responded as expected, groping her enhanced breasts and completely exposed backside. I closed my cubicle curtain, but Inferna quickly slapped it open again, forcing me to watch them grind their bodies together. Her mouth was on his neck, teeth bared like a slutty vampire. I was tempted to shout, "Get a room," but I knew they had one.

Inferna finally lost interest in making out with Chuck when I pulled out a book and started to read. She turned and walked to the bedroom, where the other women cheered her arrival. It sounded vaguely like the gobbling of prize turkeys waiting for Thanksgiving. Mercifully, she closed the door behind her, which muffled the sounds.

I was about to thank Chuck when heavy footsteps thudded down the aisle. "I'm going to kill you!" Buck grabbed Chuck and slammed him hard against the wall. Chuck fought back, which caused the bus to shake from the tectonic stress of their fight.

If the adrenaline from my close call with Inferna hadn't already primed me for action, watching Chuck and Buck lay

into each other finished the job. Before I could think coherently, I'd jumped out and landed between them. Only then did it occur to me that I might get hit trying to break up a fight between two big, strong men. Too late now.

"Stop it! Both of you."

Chuck backed away, but Buck advanced toward him, his quivering fist pulled back. He tried to get past me, but I shook my head. "You too, buster. Back off." I was in no mood for this band's petty crap, so I gave him a shove.

Buck's a big guy, so I figured I needed to put a little muscle into it if I expected to budge him at all. But I must have pushed him harder than either of us expected because he lost his balance and crashed against the wall, a look of surprise on his face. "Damn, woman!" He straightened himself with a partial smile.

Chuck had a bloody nose, but otherwise seemed fine. He grinned hugely at Buck. As he was about to stir up more trouble, the door to the bedroom opened and Inferna stepped out, completely naked. The woman really did have an incredible body. Too bad she was such a monster. She flipped me the bird then sneered at Buck and Chuck. "I don't know how you boys ended up with her on your bus."

"She's okay," Chuck snapped. "I told you, leave her alone." He turned to me and spoke softly. "I'm sorry about what I said tonight. It didn't go over too well, did it?" Wow, actual sensitivity. Who would have guessed? Perhaps Chuck didn't hate me after all. There was obviously more to him than I'd realized.

Regardless of his mental state, I didn't need to discuss it in front of Inferna. And I could tell she didn't need it, either. "Forget it, Chuck. Your fan club awaits you." I pushed him toward the bedroom, and he followed Inferna into some level of hell that Dante never envisioned.

That left Buck and me. Handsome Buck, for whom I once harbored a dreamy teenage crush. Angry Buck, who barely talked to me. Bruised Buck, with a cut on his lip and a dark spot forming on his cheek. I didn't know if I loved him or hated him—I just wished I understood him. "Why are you so angry?"

"It's him!" Buck snapped. He pointed toward the bedroom door. "He's the reason I'm so angry—I've hated his guts for ten years."

I propped my fists on my hips. "Well, you don't have to take it out on me!"

His face fell while his anger deflated. Finally, much more calm, he let out a long breath. "You're right—you've done nothing wrong. It's my crap—I'm dealing with too much right now. Touring with Chuck, annoying groupies, divorce lawyers." He dropped his head. "I'm a mess. You really should stay away from me."

A particularly loud orgasmic scream pierced the thin bedroom walls, which elicited a groan from Buck. "I have to get out of here." With that, he walked to the front of the bus and left.

I took a few seconds to collect myself, then I walked to the living room table. River was in the shower, as usual, and Gabe was sitting there with a joint in his hand, as usual. He handed me a beer. "Here, you need this." My only friend.

"Thanks, Gabe." I dropped down, took a long pull from the bottle, then collapsed against him.

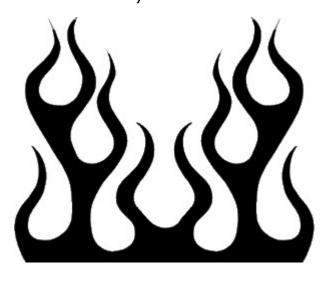
He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close. "Buck's right, you know. Chuck *is* a huge jerk. Anyway, the good news is that we're leaving this town. I've had enough of Chicago, and I bet you have, too."

He took one last drag from the joint and stubbed it out. "Let's take a stroll and get some air before we're all back on

the bus again. Besides. . ." He glanced down the hall toward the bedroom. "You don't want to be here when those women come out." He was so right.

We wandered around the busses and trucks. In two hours, we'd be leaving for Minneapolis. Just enough time for the roadies to load up the trucks and for those who wanted a shower to take one. Also enough time for Chuck to get licked clean and sucked dry, or whatever it was he did behind the closed bedroom door.

# Day Three



#### **Fourteen**



The bus rode through the night, silently across the prairie. River and Gabe crashed out early. Buck hid in his cubicle with his guitar, playing soulful acoustic songs reminiscent of the band's earlier works. I would have approached him about it, but he seemed so remote that I kept my distance. Buck wanted me to stay away, which was fine with me.

Chuck and I sat in the living room for a few hours. He apologized once again and promised to be good all night. And he was.

We watched television and played some video games. He told me stories about rock and roll. We even snuggled together while watching a movie, his solid body next to mine. Thankfully, I didn't have to fend off a single sexual advance. Before I went to bed, we exchanged chaste kisses on the cheek and a light hug.

Chuck's behavior made me happy. Perhaps his failed attempt to be nice to me on stage had taught him something. In any case, we had made it to the friend zone, which was better than the love-em-and-leave-em zone those groupies all fell into. Chuck and I were good, and I curled up in my cubicle with a smile.

I awoke in the predawn and made my way to the front of the bus, past the living room. Big Tim was at the wheel, guiding us down the road. "Morning, Big Tim." I stood next to him as we stared at the scenery. "Don't you ever get tired?"

He shrugged. "I sleep when I can and drive when I must. We're roadies—the band's punching bags." He chuckled at his lowly status. "Anyway, congrats on lasting this long. You've eliminated half the bets. Most of the guys thought you'd bail after that first concert, and all of us thought you'd bail after last night."

"I can't bail, Big Tim. I'm a punching bag, too."

"Yeah, I can tell."

"So were the boys like this before I got here, or did they get worse in Chicago?"

"I'd say they're about the same. Although I haven't seen Buck and Chuck fight like that before. Still, it's been coming for a while—they really hate each other."

"I noticed." I gave him a pat on the shoulder and went back to the living room. For the next hour, while the Fiery Boys slept, I actually enjoyed riding on the tour bus, watching the road roll by.

The busses and trucks gathered outside of the Minneapolis arena and huddled together for safety. The first thing they did was to set up the fence, a secure encampment to protect them from overeager fans. After that, the roadies got seriously busy preparing for the show.

River had arranged to get a car, and he left within minutes, gone for the day. Gabe needed to do some shopping, so he tagged along.

I wished I could have gone with River to see his home. He lived nearby, so he was probably going there. The delusional part of my mind still dreamed of spending my life with him, so I was curious to see where I'd be living. But the sensible part of me pointed out that he was really going to visit his secret girlfriend.

Buck and Chuck sat around the living room table and glared at each other. Chuck was in his usual tattered jeans

and a white T-shirt. Buck's jeans and T-shirt were both black. I took in the situation with numb resignation. Here I was, witness to a full Fiery Boys feud between two incredibly good-looking band members.

I stood by the table for a few minutes, waiting to see which of them would break the silence. Finally, I gave up and took matters into my own hands. I fetched three bottles of beer in an effort to make peace. It was early, not even lunchtime for normal people and way before that for us. But these boys definitely needed a drink.

"You two have got to stop acting like children. Buck, you're too sensitive, and Chuck, you're too insensitive." I held my bottle out. "To the two of you. May you survive the next month together."

My gesture seemed to work. Chuck had the cold bottle against his still-injured nose, so he pulled it away to join my toast. Buck looked up at me for a few seconds, then tapped my bottle with a partial smile as he nodded his thanks. We drank in silence.

The Minneapolis concert was just like the Chicago ones. Standing in the wing with Jason, I felt awash in déjà vu. Even the song list was the same.

When it was time for them to play "Fiery Life," I turned to leave the wing. I did not want to see what Chuck would do tonight. It saddened me to think that the band was quickly turning my favorite song into a dreaded event. As I walked away, I heard Chuck start up his usual inter-song banter.

Suddenly there was a clattering sound, and Buck's voice rang through the hall. "Wait a minute. This is important." Even I stopped to listen.

With the microphone in his hand, Buck took center stage, his bass guitar hanging in front of him. "Listen up,

Minneapolis. We were in Chicago last night. Those people think they're the best Fiery Boys fans in the world." The crowd booed and Buck held his hands out to silence them, grinning at the expected reaction. "You may be right. Minneapolis seems like it *is* better." The city roared its agreement.

"So here's the thing. If Minneapolis really is better, then you gotta prove it to me." They roared even louder, but Buck waved a finger back and forth, shaking his head with disapproval. "No, no. I don't mean by cheering. I mean by being the nicest fans on this entire tour."

Buck started to pace along the edge of the stage, the microphone in his hand, scanning the audience. "You all know about Annalisa Ricci, the contest winner who's touring with us." The crowd started to respond, but he raised his hands in a sign for them to stop. "Wait for it, Minneapolis. Hear me out. Last night in Chicago, they booed her! I mean, the nerve of that city! So let me hear what you think of Chicago for doing that to Annalisa." The audience erupted in angry shouts. He waved them on, encouraging them to be louder and angrier. Mr. Angry certainly knew how to push the crowd's rage button.

Buck waited for their wrath to pass, a tight grin that made it clear just how much he was enjoying this. "Now—and here is where you can prove to me that you're better than them—let me hear what you think of Annalisa." The audience actually cheered. I stood in the wings, frozen in shock.

When the fans had settled down again, he went on. "I love you, Minneapolis!" He let them cheer for themselves some more before he continued. "We're about to play Annalisa's favorite song, but first, I want to introduce you to

her." He turned toward the wing and beckoned to me. "Come on out here, Annalisa." The crowd cheered again.

I couldn't decide whether this was a good thing or not. The fans were being very nice, but I knew it was because Buck had manipulated them carefully. I worried that they could sour in an instant, and for no reason. Chuck might say something to ruin it—that seemed to be his specialty. Or Inferna might start a riot, although I had to admit she wasn't front and center tonight, so perhaps she wasn't there. But to be safe, I stayed where I was with folded arms, letting Buck know that I wasn't going to move.

Of course, Buck was unperturbed. He turned back to the audience. "You know, she's kind of shy. So let's hear it for Annalisa. Come on, Minneapolis." He started to chant, "Annalisa, Annalisa," He waved his hands, and the fans joined in. Suddenly, everyone was shouting, "Annalisa."

A trancelike state enveloped me, and I tingled all over. Being on tour with the Fiery Boys was strange enough, but having thousands of fans call my name was positively surreal. Immobilized, I stood in the wings and held my breath.

Jason snapped me out of it. "Go on out there!" He gave me a little push, and I took my first step. Then, to the accompaniment of their insistent call, I kept walking right out onto the stage.

As I crossed from the darkness of the wing into the bright stage lights, the audience switched from chant to cheer. Their applause stopped me again, and I looked around nervously. Buck ran over and took my hand, leading me to the front of the stage. He held me tightly, one hand holding mine, the other around my waist. I felt strangely safe in his embrace, even in front of this unpredictable crowd. And since I still found Buck to be stunningly

handsome, having him escort me onto the stage was pure fantasy gold.

Chuck came over to stand on the other side of me, his arm wrapped around my shoulder. To my delight, the crowd only cheered harder.

"Crazy, isn't it? Say 'hi' to Minneapolis." Buck pointed the microphone at my mouth and gave my waist a little squeeze.

Oh my God! A huge crowd of Fiery Boys fans was waiting for me to speak, so I kept it simple. "Hey there, Minneapolis. You rock!" The city howled its agreement.

"Very nice." Buck smiled and released me from these suspiciously happy people. "Go on back there, and we'll play your favorite song." I turned to walk back offstage. It seemed to take ten times as long as it had to walk out there. Why wouldn't the lights go away? Why wouldn't the crowd stop clapping for me? Forget the longest mile—this was the longest fifty feet.

As soon as I made it back to the wing, the band broke into "Fiery Life." Jason gave me a big hug and we stood together while we watched them play. Still buzzing from my first positive brush with Fiery Boys fans, I thought the song was more beautiful and meaningful than ever before.

### **Fifteen**



I made it to the wing and exhaled, glad to be in the shadows after the bright stage lights. Safe, and giddy with excitement from all the positive energy, I turned to face the boys as they launched into "Fiery Life." It nearly blew me over.

The blast from the song filled me up, supercharged me, then lit my fuse. I danced so hard that I practically skyrocketed off the walls. When the song ended, I took it down a notch, but my dancing continued to be turbocharged for the rest of the show.

On his way off stage, Chuck raised his hand up for a high-five slap. "You're beautiful, babe." I gave him five, and he continued to the bus, leaving a smile on both of our faces. Gabe wandered by, mimicking the cheer. "Annalisa. Annalisa. Even Buck gave me a thumbs up before running off to the bus.

Then something wonderful happened. River stopped to talk to me. "I'm really glad Buck did that. This is the sort of welcome you deserve."

His attention took my breath away. He was dripping sweat and breathing hard from the intensity of that last song, but I still wanted to throw myself onto his phenomenal body. I took a second to calm myself before answering. "Thanks, River. That really means a lot, especially coming from you."

He grinned proudly. "Yeah, I heard you tell Chuck that I was your favorite. So I think we should show up in some

photos together, just for fun." He held out his hand. "Come on, let me escort you back to the bus." I took his hand, and my head spun wildly back in time to the days when I would stare at his poster and let my desire roam. We headed toward the bus hand in hand, like lovers strolling in the park, like newlyweds walking down the aisle. In my fertile imagination, I was the envy of every woman on earth.

After the two Chicago concerts, I had either waited for the band to get to the bus, or fled there before anyone else had arrived. Now, for the first time, I was leaving with the band. That meant exiting the stage door while fans pressed in for a glimpse. The wall of camera-wielding groupies descended on us like iron particles to a magnet. Gabe and Buck stopped to sign autographs. Chuck groped any woman who got close to him. I heard Buck shout, "Back off!" as he peeled some woman's arms from his shoulders. He really hated groupies, and I understood why.

Thankfully, River protected me from desperate hands. He pushed away every fan girl who tried to trade places with his date tonight. I wanted to kiss him, but didn't want to start a riot. And Jason would not be happy. So I let him lead me safely to the bus.

By the time we got there, Gabe and Chuck were somewhere else, probably in the shower and the bedroom, if I had to guess. The only one in the living room was Buck, with two beers in his hands and an empty bottle on the table in front of him. River sat down at the table and swatted him on the shoulder. "Go easy there, buddy. It's a long way to Kansas City."

"Just keeping my strength up." Buck blew out a single laugh and tilted the second bottle upward, finishing it.

I sat down next to him. "Thank you for doing that, Buck. You really know how to work an audience." His smile was tight as he handed me a beer and started on his third. I took a sip, then dove back into an attempt at conversation. "By the way, how did you know that was my favorite song?"

"River told me." Buck nodded at his bandmate. I must have looked shocked, because he laughed a little. "Just because I hate Chuck, doesn't mean the rest of us don't get along." He tilted his head back to pour more beer down his throat.

Gabe came out of the shower, and River got up. He looked down at me. "I'm going to clean up, then I've got something I want to ask you." He walked away before I could begin to figure out what he meant, leaving me sitting at the table, stunned.

River wanted to ask me something, and my meandering brain spun dozens of happily-ever-after scenarios. What if he was planning on leaving his girlfriend and taking me as his lover? Okay, I knew that wasn't going to happen. But we were getting along so well, and he was going out of his way to be nice. So it might. Reality slipped into the background as fantasy wedding bells chimed in my head.

Gabe sat down in River's seat wearing only a towel. His body was quite fine looking, wiry and muscular. He lit up a joint and took a deep drag. "To a great gig and a wonderful crowd." He tapped the joint against my beer bottle in a mixed-intoxicant toast. Then, before taking a drink, I tapped my bottle with Buck's, too.

A beer with the band and my future lover in the shower. Everything was looking up. Finally, I was experiencing the Fiery Boys tour as I'd dreamed it would happen. I was sitting on the tour bus with friendly faces, having a drink with my new buddies and longtime imaginary lovers. Those roadies who expected me to run away were going to be sorely disappointed. I was busy living a fiery life.

By the time I'd started my second beer, Buck had finished his fourth. River came out of the shower, so Buck stumbled back for his turn. Gabe was off getting dressed, which left just me and River at the table. Exactly how I liked it.

Yes, the most gorgeous man on Earth was sitting next to me wearing nothing but a towel and a grin. I leaned away from him and feasted my eyes for a few seconds. River Sticks was as phenomenally sexy as ever. "I had such a crush on you when I was sixteen."

River chuckled. "Seems like you still do." He had me there.

I decided to find out where I stood with him. "Is it true that you have a secret lover?"

"Afraid so. And I don't wander when I'm out on the road. As I said, we were just playing out there."

"Oh." I straightened up. "So what was it you wanted to tell me earlier?" Maybe wedding plans weren't as likely as I'd hoped.

"Right!" He got up. "I was going to offer to let you play drums on 'Fiery Life."

"What! I can't play drums."

"Not all of them, of course. I was going to teach you the cymbal part and let you play it in the chorus. It's easy. Want to give it a try?"

"Absolutely!" I didn't need a marriage proposal anymore. River's offer, combined with the way Buck had the audience chanting my name, made this a day I'd never forget.

"Then let me get dressed, and we'll go backstage and play with some drums." He wandered back to his cubicle and soon returned in jeans, a brown shirt, and a tan hoodie, his usual casual attire. We went back to the stage.

His drums were still assembled, but most of the other gear had already been hauled off by busy roadies. He pointed to one of the cymbals, a big one at the edge of the kit. "When we play 'Fiery Life,' this one only gets used during the chorus. It's easy—just keep beating along with the song. Watch..." He pounded out the turnaround between the verse and the chorus, then started to sing the chorus while he played the drum part.

"Living by a precipice, Dancing on the blade of a knife, Liberty means so much more, You owe it, you owe yourself a fiery life."

As he played it, I watched him rhythmically pound the cymbal. Then he handed the drumstick to me. "You try it."

I could keep a beat as well as most people, so I did a fine job with my tiny part of the song. We rehearsed it a few times before retreating to the bus. The Fiery Boys tour was turning out to be everything I wanted it to be.

#### Sixteen



When River and I got back to the bus, Buck seemed thoroughly drunk. He grinned at me and slurred, "How 'bowdda brew?" I could smell quite a few of them on his breath.

"I'm good, and you've had enough."

"Wuzza madder? Can't hold yer liquor? Gonna spray me wid it?"

"You didn't like that picture, did you?" Now I knew which Fiery Boy had voted against me: Buck.

"Hey!" He laughed. "Watch me do my imitation of Annnnaliiisa." He took a swig of beer, threw his head back, and blew it into the air. Unfortunately, instead of spraying in a mist, the beer launched in an arc and landed on my blouse. I liked that blouse. Sleeveless and knotted at the waist, I thought I looked good in it. Now it was soaked with beer and spit.

I scowled at him and walked away to clean myself. Behind me, Buck called out, "Sorrrreeee."

I had to wonder why things like this happened to me. Was there a sign on my forehead that said, "Give me shit"? That would explain my boyfriends. And Buck. And Inferna. And every hater on the Internet, for that matter.

When I got back to the table, Buck had collapsed forward, asleep with his head on his arms. River looked over at him and shook his head. "I've never seen him like this."

He looked peaceful, released from his demons. "Should we try to get him to bed?"

River nodded and stood up. "I got him." He hauled Buck to his feet and dragged him down the hall, helping him into his cubicle.

Buck roused when he landed there. "I'm okay."

I peered at him. "You don't seem okay. How about some vitamins to help you deal with that hangover?" I reached over to my cubicle and dug around.

Buck tried to refuse my offer. "Don't do vitamins." He groaned. "Feeling sick."

I got the pills and climbed up to sit next to him, shoving them into his hand. "Take these, Buck."

He started to protest. "Told ja. I don't. . ."

I silenced him with a raised finger. "Doesn't matter. When you puke, they'll come right back up." I grinned and even Buck gave a light laugh.

He covered his eyes with his hand and turned away. Then he slapped the hand with the vitamins up to his mouth and threw his head back. I gave him a glass of water to wash them down. "Good. Now rest." I got down from his bunk.

Before I'd made it two steps toward the living room, River stopped me. "Stay with him." He spoke softly, but his deep voice was impossible to resist.

I was confused. Why was he pushing me to Buck? Angry and drunk Buck, who grumbled all the time and spat beer at me. I'd vastly prefer to sit up front with River. "But. . ."

He cut me off with a wave of his hand. "Just climb up there and sit for a few minutes until he falls asleep." He kissed me on the cheek and whispered, "Do it for me." For River? How could I refuse? Too bad I hadn't met him before he'd found his lover. A man this kind and devoted and powerfully attractive was a rarity.

I climbed back into Buck's cubicle and sat with my feet dangling out. Laying on his back, he looked up at me and groaned. He might be drunk and he was certainly annoying, but I couldn't deny the fact that he was a fine-looking man, someone I'd idolized for a decade. And tonight he had talked the audience into liking me. So I reached out to give him a pat on the shoulder.

Before my hand made it to his shoulder, he snagged it and pulled it to his stomach. Then he rolled away from me and curled up in a ball, forcing me down to the bed, spooning him. I was simultaneously alarmed and delighted. I sighed and gave him a little squeeze, which thrilled me more than I expected. He felt so solid and warm, that I even entertained a few naughty fantasies. Ridiculous, of course.

Buck's breathing soon grew regular. I considered pulling away and leaving his side but thought better of it. This was Buck Morris, the bass player of the Fiery Boys and my second favorite rocker of all time. So why was I objecting to lying next to him in his bed with my arm wrapped around him? Besides, if I left now, I'd never hear the end of it from Kira and Jo. So I relaxed and continued to spoon him.

The bus squealed to a stop, waking both Buck and me. Somehow in the night, we had changed positions so that he was now spooning me. He grunted and pulled his hand from my breast. "Sorry."

I rolled over to face him. "Feel better?"

"Yeah, much. But I gotta return that beer. Move." I hopped out of the cubicle so Buck could run for the bathroom.

From across the aisle, River peeked up at me with a smile. "Did you sleep?"

I blushed. "Yes, thanks. Are we in Kansas City?"

"Probably." He walked forward so he could peer out the front window. "Yep. Another day, another arena." He shook his head with a smirk. "What a life."

I smiled at the spectacular drummer. "A fiery one."

"Sometimes I wonder." He crawled back into his cubicle and closed the curtain.

## Day Four



### Seventeen



Although I was leading a fiery life, the rest of the people on tour with me seemed to be having more of a monotonous life. I watched the roadies set up for another concert like they were robots. Even the boys were merely going through the motions, showing up for the sound check hung over and lethargic.

River made them play "Fiery Life" twice so I could practice my part on the cymbal. He applauded after the second time, and Gabe gave me a hug. Buck bowed to me in silent approval, and Chuck gave me a kiss on the cheek. I was on top of the world.

We went back to the bus before the show, and Chuck challenged me to another video game. He'd been much more considerate lately, sitting up all night without a single sexual come-on. It made me like him more than I ever had. I could almost see adding benefits to this friendship. Almost.

We flopped down on the sofa to look through the choices. After considering a few titles, he lost interest and started to kiss my neck. Clearly his way of saying that the choice of a game was unimportant. His kisses felt nice, a warm sensation from a gorgeous rocker. I kept browsing for games, but my attention wasn't on the selection, either.

Chuck's kisses started to feel even better, and crazy ideas filled my head. The thought of making out with this handsome and talented man suddenly had powerful appeal. I certainly wasn't afraid of his advances anymore. So I

discretely turned to find his mouth, transforming his innocent pecks into a fully-realized kiss. His lips were warm and firm and lightly parted, offering a taste that I instantly wanted more of. We reached out our tongues at the same time, which sent a flush of excitement coursing through me. Who needed video games?

I could see that Chuck was going to make it past the friend zone, which worked for me. Face it, the week was half-way done, and there weren't any other offers. River was in a committed relationship. Buck was wound-up so tight you needed extra insurance just to go near him. And Gabe was my friend. So Chuck, who'd professed his desire from the moment I boarded the bus, might just get his wish. He'd be the perfect Fiery Boys fling.

Just as our kiss was getting serious, the mood was shattered by the sound of rattling glass. I pulled away as Buck came into the living room with the box of recycled bottles from the kitchen. "Box is full, gotta move it out." He swayed comically when he got near us, grinning and pretending to lose control of the box as it teetered in his hands. The bottles crashed against each other and one of them actually fell onto the coffee table. "Oops," he let out a laugh. The bottle had sunk into a day-old bowl of mystery snack food that nobody wanted to finish. Buck pulled it out and tossed it loudly onto the top of the pile. "Sorry to disturb you." He laughed some more as he slowly made his way across the living room, dancing with the noisy box of glass until he was off the bus and heading towards the recycling bins.

Chuck and I laughed at the interruption. The moment had passed, so he gave me one brief kiss, then he pulled away and actually did choose a video game to play. But now the game was filled with a new kind of tension.

The show that night had an exciting edge to it. Not only was I feeling Chuck's heat, but I was also nervous about playing with the band. In fact, I was so keyed up that I didn't even notice when Jason appeared by my side. "What's eating you tonight?"

I jumped at the sound of his voice, but acted nonchalant and kept facing the stage. "River's letting me play drums on 'Fiery Life."

Jason stepped around to face me. "He's what?" Definitely unhappy—I wondered if he'd try to stop me. Should River have cleared this with him first?

In an effort to placate him, I pointed out how small my part was. "I'm only playing during the chorus, and all I get is one cymbal. I'll dance during the verses."

I couldn't wait to dance next to River. And playing drums with him would be an unforgettable experience. "It wasn't my idea—River offered. He wants my week on tour to be special. Hey!" I grinned. "How could I refuse?"

Jason stiffened. "Don't expect him to fall in love with you. You'll be gone soon, and he has his own life." As if I didn't already know that. I ignored Jason so I could focus on the band. At least they weren't counting the days until my week was over.

Jason shifted to get back in my face. "And another thing. This is *not* how you dress for the stage."

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?" I admit that I'd toned it down a little tonight because I was going out there. I didn't want to be flashing mile-long leggings or a short skirt to an entire crowd. So I had on a nice pair of blue jeans, calf-high boots, and a tan top, loose fitting with open sleeves.

Jason grumbled. "It's not sexy enough. I can't stop you tonight, but in the future, when you're on stage with the Fiery Boys, you have to dress for it. Tight and colorful, with lots of skin showing. Not some stupid jeans and a baggy blouse." Wow, what a micromanager. I wondered if he had makeup tips for me, too.

I was used to Jason's irascibility by now, and I'd had enough of it. With a nod, I stepped away from him to watch the show.

When it was time to play "Fiery Life," Chuck introduced me without saying anything embarrassing at all. Instead, he teased River. "We have a special guest drummer tonight who's going to help River make it through the next song." He waved to the wing. "Come on out, Annalisa."

I ran onto the stage to light applause and stood by the side of River's drum kit. He handed me a drumstick, then he clapped his sticks together to start the song.

I felt woozy but forced myself to stand straight. I also had to force myself to stop grinning so much while I waited under the bright stage lights. The song got going, and I started to move. At first, I felt a little self-conscious being on stage. Was I dressed wrong? Was my dancing wrong? Were the fans annoyed?

Then I decided to let it all go. After all, I was there with the Fiery Boys, helping them play the most important song of my life. How could I not rock out?

The song seemed to progress much more slowly than ever before. I heard the notes distinctly, as if they were being played in isolation. When it was time for the chorus, an autonomic muscle response moved my arm and I crashed my stick to the cymbal. Then, without thinking about it, I started to pound with the beat.

Whoa! I was drumming with the Fiery Boys. I felt as if I'd passed through the looking glass of my high school

poster and had emerged on the other side, jamming next to the incredibly sexy River Sticks.

The chorus ended much too quickly, and I caught myself just in time, stopping my rhythmic crashing at the right moment. River gave me a huge grin then turned back to thrash the drums like a madman.

I fell back into my dance easily, proud to be part of the song. As the guest groupie, playing with the band under the approving gaze of the world's hottest drummer, my life had never burned as brightly.

The song ended and I stood there, basking in the applause. Then, as if my fairy godmother had waved her magic wand over the audience, the applause transformed into the Annalisa chant from Minneapolis. Suddenly, thousands of fans were yelling, "Annalisa. Annalisa. Annalisa." Even the Fiery Boys joined the chant, pumping their fists in the air.

I stood by the drums with a huge grin on my face. Chuck came over so he could lead me to the front of the stage. He hugged me and gave me a kiss on the cheek while the audience continued to chant.

I tried to take all of this in, but I still couldn't believe it -my life was more than bizarre. In mere months, I had gone from a nobody who rarely got noticed to a well-known rock personality who stood at the front of the stage while thousands of people shouted my name.

## **Eighteen**



The show ended, and the band ran from the stage. Chuck stopped to pull me into a hug. "I've got to get cleaned up, then I'm dealing with the press. Come along—it'll be fun."

I liked this new Chuck, a vast improvement over the desperately horny rocker I'd first met. He was considerate and pleasant and respectful. And when I factored in his kisses and his crazy good looks, he was almost irresistible. We went to a dressing room where he peeled off his sweaty shirt. I stared at him for a few seconds. Tall and trim, his chest glistened lightly. For the first time, I could see how running my tongue over his body might not be as repulsive as I'd imagined. He started to dry himself with a towel.

"You do have a fine body, Chuck."

"As do you, my dear. You have no idea how badly I crave it."

"I think I'm beginning to feel that craving, too."

Chuck's grin ran clear across his face. "Let's see what we can do about these cravings after the press meet." He gave me a firm kiss, then he put on a clean shirt and led me out of the dressing room.

As we headed down the hall, Chuck held my hand. "You know, Annalisa, next time you play, come to the front of the stage and dance with me during the verses. Then you can go back to River when you play the chorus. More showy that way. We can even dance together." That sounded like an excellent idea.

Chuck led me to a Fiery Boys press wall in a room full of reporters and photographers. I couldn't help but notice that they showed the same level of enthusiasm for him as a gaggle of groupies did, except that they didn't fling their bodies at him. Instead, they flung a barrage of questions. And to my surprise, many of the questions were for me.

"How are you enjoying the tour, Annalisa?"

"Are the Fiery Boys as fiery as ever?"

"Who's your favorite Fiery Boy?"

Chuck leaned close to me and whispered, "Don't bother answering them. Just kiss me."

When he dropped his lips onto mine, the reporters let out a howl. I'd been thinking about his kisses for the past few hours, wondering if we'd get a chance to do more. Although this didn't seem like the right place for it, the waves of heat running through my body made it hard to complain. Solid and so seductive, Chuck's gorgeous eyes locked onto mine.

Oh my God! I was kissing the lead singer of the Fiery Boys in front of the whole world. Flashes went off constantly. Kira would explode when she saw this. Jason would be supremely annoyed. And Inferna. . . well, she could kiss my ass.

It didn't matter what anyone thought. I'd kiss Chuck if I wanted to. Something burned in me, and I threw my arms around his neck to kiss him back, hard and willing. His tall, muscular body felt great.

Jason stepped up close to us. "You're here for a reason, Chuck, and it's not about Annalisa. Focus!" He pointed to one of the reporters and moderated a question. To my surprise, I was still the most interesting person in the room. They wanted to know where I stood with the band, how I

liked the bus, and what I thought of the fans. I gave brief, evasive answers to avoid any controversy.

Chuck stood there tapping his foot. Finally past his ability to endure being ignored, he cut in after one of my answers and took my hand. "We're done here. Let's go." Feeling proud of myself and too charged up to resist, I let him lead me to the bus, our arms around each other, stumbling and laughing.

On the bus, he took my hands and walked backward down the aisle, pulling me along with a huge smile. I followed along happily. Gabe narrowed his eyes as we walked past. "Want any more to join the party?"

"Yes," Chuck said at the same time that I said, "No." We stopped and stared at each other. "It's better with more girls." His eyes flashed a few times in an attempt to convince me.

Disappointed, I shook my head and groaned. We continued to stare at each other, at an impasse by the living room table.

He really wanted to invite other women, but I simply couldn't go there. Sex with the handsome lead-singer of the Fiery Boys? Sure. Sex with some strange, unfriendly woman? No.

But Chuck wasn't yielding, so I had to think about this a little harder. Was I being too proud to share this man, this buff rock god who wrote my favorite song and had a voice that could shred my soul? So what if another groupie joined the fun? Would that be so terrible?

I already knew that Kira and Jo would do a three-way with Chuck. And they'd tell stories about it for years. So if I was willing to encourage my friends' wild sex parties, why wasn't I allowing Chuck to throw one for me? Dazed and

already lightly aroused from Chuck's kisses, I caved in and decided I could handle it.

I said "Okay, yes," at exactly the same time that he said, "Okay, no." We grinned at each other.

"So can we get two more girls?"

I shrugged and exhaled my discomfort. "Oh, all right."

But Chuck did have a sensitive side, after all. He gave me a concerned look. "You don't seem happy."

"It's okay," I slumped my shoulders. "I'll do it your way if you like, but I'd prefer it if we were alone. I guess I'm just a romantic."

"Um, well... oh, okay." Chuck looked down for a few seconds before he raised his face with a smile. "None tonight, Chip." Then he pulled me into the bedroom and shut the door.

This was it. My moment with a rock star. I was about to have a tabloid-scale sexual experience in the back of the tour bus, and I was ready. I knew I'd be just another groupie, but I still wanted that Girl Scout badge. Why not?

Jason's rules meant nothing anymore. Nor did I care what the fans would say about me for doing this. Besides, the press already had enough pictures of us kissing to draw their own conclusions. As the contest winner, I had some serious opportunities, here. I would fuck Chuck. So there, lason.

Chuck's hands and lips and ripped body were doing a fine job on me—I was totally stoked. It didn't even bother me that he usually bedded a harem. So what if he had a lead-singer-sized ego and only thought about sex? Right now, that was all I could think about, too. Our mouths collided and stayed firmly locked in place.

After a few minutes, Chuck pulled away and leaped onto the bed, his arms spread out. "Let me look at you." His sparkling eyes drilled right through me, even across the room. Mesmerized, I started to approach the bed but he raised a hand. "No. Stay there. Undress for me, slowly."

Yes, I would. I was completely under his spell. A slow strip-tease for Chuck sounded perfect.

I removed my blouse, one button at a time, tugging it gently from my jeans, and letting it slide off my shoulders, inch-by-inch. My boots and jeans went next, leaving me in my underwear. I made a huge show of removing my bra while Chuck cheered me on. Then for my finale, I worked my panties down then up again, left then right, teasing and flashing until I finally slid them down my legs. Chuck applauded.

I approached the bed but Chuck stopped me again and insisted that I continue the show. So I continued to tease him with my best moves, a pole dance without the pole. The sexy green-eyed singer was very appreciative of my act, which made me enjoy it even more.

I soon found myself growing surprisingly excited. I'd been so busy working to please Chuck that I'd forgotten about my own pleasure. But my body hadn't forgotten. It knew that I was naked and putting on an autoerotic show. By this point, it wanted more—no, it *needed* more.

I approached the bed. "Now it's your turn. I'm going to undress you, slowly."

He paused with a shrug. "Okay." He didn't seem convinced, but he wasn't stopping me, so I got to it.

I made him sit up and tugged on his shirt, slowly inching it up his body and over his head. His approving grunts told me how much he enjoyed that. I needed to get Chuck naked already, so I pulled him to his feet and unzipped his pants. I got them down his legs as slowly as possible, the two of us grinning the entire way. Chuck stood

there in his briefs, with one hand resting over his crotch. I'd seen what he had down there and knew I was in for a treat.

I couldn't wait another second. Given how quickly I'd watched gangs of women pass through the bedroom with Chuck, I was surprised at how patient he was being. But patience was no longer a virtue, so instead of a slow tease with his underwear, I grabbed the sides and yanked them straight down his legs. He let them go, but his hand still covered the good stuff. That wouldn't do. So I pulled his arm away to get at the only thing that could satisfy me.

But something was wrong.

He was limp, completely not turned on. I stood up and looked into his clearly embarrassed eyes. "What's wrong, Chuck?"

"I. . . I don't know if I can do this."

"Why not? Am I doing something wrong?"

"It's not you. I just need more than one girl, more than one thing happening at a time. That gets me going."

What could I say? We were done before we began. I could never be enough for Chuck unless I shared him. After staring for a minute, I stepped away from the bed, defeated. "Okay, never mind."

"We could find some more groupies. . ."

I blew out a long breath. "I don't think so." Even though I was pretty turned on by this point, I knew it was time to give up. If some sexy woman waltzed in here and immediately got him hard I'd be devastated. Reluctantly, I dressed and wandered to the living room in a daze.

Gabe and River were gone. Buck looked up from the living room table, shook his head darkly, then marched right by me and into his cubicle. Before climbing up, he turned to the bedroom door and glared at Chuck. "I hope you're happy, fucker."

#### 130 Sage Ardman

Chuck got dressed and managed to make it past Buck without starting a fight. Then he collapsed on the sofa with a whispered, "Sorry."

What I was doing here? The two band members who were nice to me were gone. I was left with Chuck the sexually challenged, and Buck the angry. When they weren't trying to kill each other, each of them could occasionally show moments of kindness to me. But I was tired of digging so deep, and my arousal called to me. At the very least, I needed a private place to attend to myself.

I turned to face Chuck. "I've got to get out of here for the night. I'll be back tomorrow."

He nodded like a little kid who had just broken an expensive vase. "Okay."

I grabbed my backpack, left the bus, and found a cab. "Take me to the nearest decent motel."

### Nineteen



I sat in a cab, upset and horny. After Chuck's failure to launch, I needed a warm bath and my hand between my legs, pronto. Four days with the Fiery Boys certainly hadn't gotten me anything better.

My phone rang, and mercifully, it was Jo. I wasn't sure what I would say to her, but I was glad for a friendly voice. I took the call. "Hi. What's happening?"

Jo laughed. "Uh, no. That's supposed to be my line. After seeing pictures of you and Chuck kissing, *I'm* the one who gets to ask what's happening."

"Don't." She'd love to hear what just went on, but I couldn't tell her.

"That doesn't sound like a woman who's had a toss with the lead singer of the Fiery Boys."

"That's because I didn't. I'm in a cab right now, heading to a motel for the night. Alone."

"That little prick! So all he did was kiss you for the cameras then kick you off the bus?"

"I kicked myself off the bus."

"Oh no! Are you coming home?"

I sighed. "I'll be back on the bus tomorrow. I just wanted someplace else for the night."

"Sounds like the tour bus is a huge fail."

Frustrated, humiliated, and up to my ears with arousal, I let it all go in an outpouring of tears. The cab driver looked at me in the rearview mirror but was decent enough not to say anything. Jo also let me sob for a while. Finally, I got it

under control. "I'm sorry. I can handle this, but I need a little alone time first."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I do, but not right now." The cab pulled to a stop, and I looked around. "I'm at the motel now, so I'm going to go. I promise I'll tell you all about it someday."

"That's okay. Take care of yourself, Annalisa. Call me any time." She hung up.

The motel looked pretty nice—one of those places with suites for businesspeople. I took a deep breath and walked over to the desk clerk, who seemed like he was just a high school kid. He wouldn't even look up from whatever game he was playing. Great, nobody was on my side tonight.

I waited a few seconds, then rattled things on the counter to get his attention. The clerk finally looked up at me and burst into a big smile. "I know you! You're the girl who's touring with the Fiery Boys." He started to chant, "Annalisa, Annalisa, Annalisa."

I couldn't escape. As much as I wanted to scream at him, my problems weren't his fault. I forced a smile. "I didn't realize I was that famous."

"Well, I'm a big Fiery Boys fan. I was even at the show tonight. I can't wait to tell my friends I met you." He turned to look at his computer. "And by the way, I have a room waiting for you." He worked for a few seconds and then handed me a key card.

I frowned. "Don't I have to register first? Give you a credit card?"

"Special deal for you. It's all set up." He gave me a wink.

I worried about what he had in mind. Sure, I was horny, but not for this kid. I held up the key. "I don't want any visitors, understand?"

He slapped a hand to his chest. "Of course! I promise you'll be alone." He seemed sincere, and I was anxious to get to the room, so I thanked him and wandered down the hall.

As I walked to my room, I wondered if there would be something unusual about it. Did the desk clerk really give me a free room, or was there a catch? I usually got treated worse because of this contest, not better.

I slipped the key card in the door and it unlocked, already a good sign. When I stepped in, I was even more pleased. On the right was a living room, with a sofa and chairs facing a big television. On the left was a small kitchen. And straight ahead was a hallway which led to a bathroom and a bedroom.

Alone at last, in my very own suite, it felt nice. I had to admit that I'd been feeling cramped on the bus. Now I could relax in my own room, spacious and luxurious, even if for just one night.

I double-locked the door and got right down to the business of my arousal, still raging through me from whatever it was that Chuck and I had done. I pulled off my blouse much more quickly than I had for him, and shucked my boots and jeans in short order. Feeling playful, I danced around for a few seconds while I unhooked my bra. Then I pulled it off and flung it at a lamp, just like in the movies where clothing gets strewn everywhere. Yeah, I was getting into it.

Unfortunately, I threw my bra too hard and the lamp fell over on the table.

Then things got weird.

A man's voice called out from the bedroom. "That's fast room service!" The bedroom door opened a crack and the man spoke again. "Leave it on the table. Tip's there." Then he closed the door.

Oh great! I was right about that desk clerk—he had given me someone else's room. Now I'd have to go back to the office and deal with it. I simply couldn't get a break.

I was about to get dressed when something dawned on me. That voice was familiar—it sounded like River. Could it be? The desk clerk had recognized me, and would certainly know if River had previously checked in. Did he give me this key because he thought we were hooking up?

I noticed that the bedroom door had drifted open a little, allowing the barest slice of light to emerge. Was River Sticks in the next room with his secret lover? I needed to know.

Since I was wearing nothing but panties, I picked up my open-sleeved blouse and slipped it on, not sparing the time to button it. I couldn't wait to find out if River was here, and if so, who he was with.

Besides, a coarser part of me, which still hadn't been satisfied tonight, wondered if I could get in on the action. Why get completely dressed when there might be a hot lover waiting for me? Yes, I know I'd been refusing three-ways with Chuck all week, but this was River. For him, I'd do just about anything. Don't judge me!

I disguised my voice in a deep grunt, pretending to be the room service waiter. "Thanks." I even opened the suite door, made foot-shuffling sounds, and closed it again. Then, I tiptoed toward the bedroom to see who was in there. Oh, I was being very bad.

Through the crack in the door, I could see a few inches of the room, and as I shifted from side to side, more of it came into view. I slowed my search when I found a mirror, which reflected directly onto a bed. And on the bed I saw a man's feet and legs. I continued to scan upward so I could

see more of his body, which definitely looked like River's. When I got to his head, I knew I was right.

My heart started to pound, and my mouth went dry. River's naked body entwined with his lover's, moving like liquid heat. Back in high school, I used to masturbate to his poster, but watching the real man was so much better. My hyper-aroused state shot into overdrive and I dipped a hand into my panties. I knew it was wrong to watch, but my hormonally agitated brain wouldn't be denied.

River rolled on the bed and his lover came into view. As she turned her face to me, I watched carefully, ready to learn the truth.

That's when everything screeched to a halt.

I knew this person. River's secret lover was very familiar. And even more shocking, River's secret lover was a man. Gabe.

I stood like a statue as I digested this new information. River and Gabe were gay—I did not see that coming. Of course, my concern wasn't that they were gay, I had no issues with that. What upset me was that River was supposed to be my lover. I had to admit it hurt to find out this would never happen. Sure he had told me that he was committed, but I still fantasized that I had a chance. Not anymore.

I should have turned away from this shameless lurking. But a depraved and Fiery Boys-deprived part of me kept watching. And whoa! Talk about hot. These two didn't have any arousal problems, and my own arousal no longer seemed like a problem, either. Suddenly, I was back in high school, masturbating to River's poster. I pushed down my panties so I could get serious.

Lost in a carnal daze, I was mesmerized by the splendor of River's body. Naked, buff, and aroused, he was an incredibly sexy man. And Gabe's body looked pretty damn good right now, especially when moving against River's. When I thought about it a little more, I realized I was glad they were lovers. I would have been much more upset if I had to watch River with some strange woman.

These two naked men reminded me of young Greek gods. Their muscles flexed as they glided in erotic dance. Their faces showed both sexual excitement and a deep longing for each other, the exquisite joy of being in a lover's embrace. I was incredibly happy for them.

Their cries of passion started to grow louder, and I circled my hand faster. Something powerful began to build for all three of us. Suddenly, they cried out, which triggered an orgasm that blew through me like an explosion at a fireworks factory. I remember thinking that I should keep quiet, just as a scream burst from my lungs. But nothing mattered right then.

I definitely needed this. Given Chuck's inability, River and Gabe's removal from the mating pool, and Buck's overall bad attitude, I suspected that this was the best I was going to get from the Fiery Boys. So I took a moment to enjoy a shattering climax.

Unfortunately, when I opened my eyes I saw River and Gabe staring at me from the bedroom door. And all three of us were naked. Even my blouse had slipped off my shoulders when I wasn't paying attention. Awkward!

I spoke quickly. "Don't be mad—I can explain. I wasn't following you. Honest!"

River held up his hands. "Whoa. Slow down." He took a motel bathrobe from the closet and tossed it to me. Then, safely wrapped in towels, he and Gabe joined me at the living room table.

"So, Annalisa." River grinned. "How did you end up sneaking into our suite and beating off while we made love?" An unusual but entirely reasonable question.

I blew out a loud breath. "Chuck's been much nicer to me lately, so I let him take me to the bedroom." I looked over at Gabe. "You were there, you saw what happened."

Gabe nodded. "I wondered what would happen between just the two of you. Did you actually get any?"

My eyes widened. "So you know that Chuck can't get it up unless he has multiple women with him?"

Gabe practically giggled. "Of course I know that. Why do you think I keep fetching groupies for him? Like so many lead singers, he's always on stage, even in the bedroom. And it's simple enough to find fans who'll share him. Also, I love it when the paps take pictures of me with those women. Makes people think I'm straight." He shot me a big smile. "Fooled you."

"Lots of things fooled me. My naked romp with Chuck certainly did. It left me frustrated and seriously turned on." I let out a pathetic laugh. "I couldn't sit around on the bus with a sorry-eyed Chuck, so I came here to get a motel room. Unfortunately, the clerk recognized me and gave me your room key."

I apologized for my shameless activity in the suite, but also pointed out that they were thrilling to watch. To my relief, they weren't upset. River even told me about a masquerade party they'd once attended that turned into an orgy. The costumes were pretty good, and you couldn't always tell who any two people having sex really were. So River and Gabe found a quiet corner and made love right there, while all across the room a dozen other straight and gay couples did the same.

River tilted his head. "What we want to know is, can you keep this a secret?"

Tonight definitely seemed to be band-secret night. I felt bad for these two closeted Fiery Boys, and I needed to apologize for intruding on them. I let my smile grow in warmth. "Yes, of course I can. Do Chuck and Buck know?"

River relaxed some more. "Yeah, they know. So does Jason. But that's about it. Oh, except now you know."

I was truly happy for them and wanted them to feel comfortable, so I gave them my warmest smile. "Did you come here to hide from me, or do you always go to motels?"

"We always leave the bus. Too many strangers show up when you least expect it."

It all made sense, and much of my confusion about the band evaporated like the morning fog. Knowing their secret brought me closer to them in a different way. A way that made me happy. These were the two band members who had been the nicest to me, and I understood that it was because they felt no sexual tension. Now that I knew their secret, I felt none, either. We were friends.

There was a knock at the door, this time the real room service. Gabe and I hid while River opened the door. As the cart got wheeled in, a half-dozen flashes went off in his face. The hallway was crawling with paparazzi.

River slammed the door. "Fuck. Someone leaked our whereabouts, probably that desk clerk. Now we're stuck in here."

I got a crazy idea and gave him a devilish smile. "You know, I could leave with you. Give them what they want. Then Gabe could sneak out later."

Gabe shook his head. "I can't sneak out now. Someone would see me. If you're willing to be photographed with River, would you be willing to do it with both of us?"

"Certainly," I laughed. "Let them think we had a threeway. In fact, why don't we put on a show. Let's act lewd and horny. In the morning, we can make a big scene when we check out together."

River bolted out a laugh, and Gabe hugged me. "You sure? You're going to get a lot of hate for it."

"I can handle haters. Besides, when this week is up, they'll forget all about me." At least I hoped that would be true.

I got dressed, leaving a few buttons from my blouse unbuttoned. River and Gabe put on pants but left their shirts off. Then we stumbled to the office, giggling and grabbing each other as flashes went off all around us. Standing by the front desk, I got more than a little turned on again as the bald and bad River Sticks held me to his side and kissed me. I squeezed him tight and let me tell you, he felt great. So what if he was gay? He still had a sizzling hot body. Gabe wasn't too bad, either, now that I'd seen more of him. I was having the best time in the world groping them.

Prying myself from River like a sated lover, I gave the desk clerk my most vampy look. "Say, honey. Where can we get some booze?"

The kid grinned at us and pointed out the door. "There's a liquor store a few blocks from here."

I couldn't resist pushing it too far, so I let out a growl and ran my hand over River's scalp. "Hey." I was speaking to River and Gabe, but made sure the clerk and the paparazzi could hear, too. "Let's do that thing with the whipped cream and chocolate sauce." I giggled and turned back to the clerk. "What about a grocery store?"

The kid swallowed. "Uh yeah, there's one next to the liquor store."

### 140 Sage Ardman

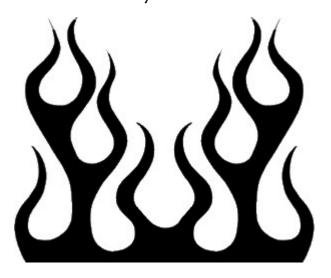
"Mmm. Can't wait." I dragged my two favorite Fiery Boys back to the room where we collapsed onto the sofa, laughing uncontrollably. Then we finished dressing and talked.

Suddenly free from secrets, River and Gabe became downright voluble, and we talked for hours. I heard how the two of them were instantly attracted to each other when the band was formed. They were only fifteen at the time and hadn't fully realized their homosexuality. But because of their attraction and the close working conditions, they figured it out together and lost their virginity soon after. The relationship stuck.

I was surprised at the steps they had taken to keep their love secret all these years. They worked hard to act straight, guarding both their speech patterns and their body language. They made up fake girlfriends and extensive lies that they told when anyone asked about them. Gabe even went so far as to keep a decoy house in his hometown of Detroit. The two of them actually lived together on a remote farm, an hour southwest of Minneapolis.

At one point, River gave me a friendly kiss. "You're the best, Annalisa. I'm glad you're on tour with us." I was glad, too—very much so.

# Day Five



### **Twenty**



River and Gabe let me sleep on the sofa that night, although we talked so much that we hardly slept. By the time we got back to the bus, it was nearly noon. Another incredible night with the Fiery Boys.

Gabe found a number of articles about our phantom threesome, and he showed them to us on the bus's living room screen. Because of my earlier public display with Chuck, most articles threw him into the mix too, declaring that the contest winner had scored with three Fiery Boys in a single night. The fans seemed quite proud of me. We didn't bother to look up Inferna's reaction.

In addition to now being an established Fiery Boys tramp, I was also getting some attention for my stage presence during "Fiery Life." A viral fan video had captured one of my wilder dance moves, and everyone was citing this little act as the siren song of a horny groupie. Male fans called it my CWILF dance, referring to their earlier acronym about my desirability. And everyone was declaring me the winner of much more than a simple contest.

Jason climbed onto the bus and stepped in front of the screen. His scowl reminded me that all was not well in bandville. "You!" He pointed at me, his hand shaking angrily. I knew what was coming, and it wasn't about River and Gabe. "Pack your shit and get off my bus."

Given that I hadn't done any of the things he thought I had, I figured I might have a chance at redemption. "It's not what you think, Jason. I didn't do anything with Chuck."

"Bullshit. You and Chuck were all over each other at that press meet. And everyone saw you two run back to the bus like naughty school children. I warned you not to fuck him, but you didn't listen. Now everyone's talking about it." He stepped closer to where I sat on the sofa. "Out!"

"It's not my fault he kissed me. You know how horny he is. But we did *not* have sex. Ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

Chuck chose this moment to come into the living room. "She's right, Jason. Didn't happen. As much as I wanted it, Annalisa is still a Chuck-virgin."

That stopped Jason. He squinted at Chuck for a second. "You're defending her? Why?"

Chuck shrugged. "Because it's the truth. She's okay by me. And she was a good sport at the press meet." He stepped closer to Jason. "Let her stay. She'll be gone in a few days anyway."

"But the fans. . ." Jason trailed off when he saw Gabe shaking his head. "What?"

Gabe smiled. "The fans love her. They're proud of her for scoring with three of us at once. Not jealous at all."

Jason darkened. "That's not what Inferna says."

"Sure, there are still plenty of haters, but *No Moss* loves it. Check out what Ivory Doe wrote." Gabe pointed at the screen.

Jason studied it for a few minutes then turned back to us. "Fine. But what was this shit with you and River?"

Gabe glared. "Shit, Jason? Look, the paps spotted her at our motel, and she offered to be our beard." He got up from the couch and snapped at the testy band manager. "Would you rather she outed us?"

River got up and also stepped threateningly close to Jason. He and Gabe had him boxed in. "You're the fuckhead

who wanted us to stay in the closet. She helped us—you should thank her."

Jason pulled away from them and frowned at the three Fiery Boys who were banding together to defend me. He took a few noisy breaths, then turned and left the bus, muttering, "God how I hate this job." We all laughed when he was safely out the door.

After Jason left, Buck wandered into the living room. He squinted at Chuck and me. "You two can lie to Jason, but I saw you back there." Before we could straighten him out, he'd stomped back to his cubicle. It didn't matter—everything else was going well. Buck could think what he wanted.

The next city on the tour was Denver, but not until the following night. We had all day to get there, so the band packed up and left by early afternoon. I sat in the front of the living room so I could watch the world speed by.

While I stared at the road, the band kept busy with their usual pursuits. Gabe had his phone connected to his laptop and was having gleeful techno-fun. River was listening to music and drumming on the table when the mood grabbed him. Buck was hiding in his cubicle with his guitar. And Chuck was drinking tequila. Just another day on the road with the Fiery Boys.

Kira called to give me the news. "Triple score! You rule, girl." She was going to be so disappointed.

I wandered back to the bedroom so I could have some privacy. "It's not what you think."

"That's what Jo said. So what is it? I saw pictures of Chuck kissing you yesterday, and some half-dressed shots of you with River and Gabe. Now everyone figures you'll be doing Buck next."

"Oh sweet. Well here's the bad news: no sex with Chuck. The only thing that happened was those kisses at the press meet. And the chances that I'll soon be doing Buck are nil."

"Well, I'm still proud of you. So what's going on?"

I wanted to say nothing was going on, but that wouldn't do it justice. Something was definitely happening—I was forming a friendship with River and Gabe. River had opened up completely and had rekindled in me a new kind of love for him. And I liked Gabe more than I had for the past ten years.

River talked about Minneapolis, where he and Gabe lived together, outside of the city. Many of his relatives lived nearby. He loved the farm and couldn't wait to get back there. He even made me promise to come visit them after the tour ended.

Gabe also opened up and talked to me even more than before. He showed me new pages he was posting on the Fiery Boys website, suggested new features for my phone, and raved about the latest band equipment. Everything in his world was totally digital, mega, ultra, and nano. Or something like that. But we were talking quite a bit—he even asked about my friends and family. I had really connected with River and Gabe.

But I had to tell Kira something, and the truth couldn't be revealed. "It's. . . complicated." Yeah, that about covered it. "I'll tell you all about it someday, but I can't yet."

"Wow! Mystery and suspense. Well, at least you're having fun."

"Yes, I finally am."

"Can you tell me one thing, though? Did you really get drunk, pour tubs of whipped cream and chocolate sauce on each other, then have a three-way with River and Gabe?"

I laughed so hard I nearly fell off the bed. "Sorry, that never happened. But there *is* a story there, and I promise to tell it one day."

"Awesome." Kira was enraptured, even though she didn't know a thing. But she did know the Internet buzz. And that was something I wanted to hear. Gabe had looked at some sites, but Kira might have seen different ones.

I forced myself to ask, although I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer. "Do the fans hate me for this?"

"Not really. Most people are happy you got some. In fact, we'd be pretty annoyed if the winner didn't get at least one little romp."

Ouch. That seemed to be my destiny: not even one little romp. See? I knew I wouldn't be having sex with any of them.

"What about Inferna?" Jason had already confirmed that the slutty fan-girl was unhappy, but I was curious to know the details.

"Oh, just the usual. Now that you're a grade-A slut, she has proof that you must die."

"I'm a slut? Has she looked in the mirror lately?"

Kira laughed. "I know. Oh, and also, Inferna is protesting the very air you breathe and refuses to go to any Fiery Boys concerts while you're backstage."

I wondered why I hadn't seen her for a few days. "That's downright considerate of her."

"Yep. But watch out! She's rebranded her site to focus on you. Her tagline is now, 'The site for Fiery Boys fans who hate Annalisa.' And she's becoming more and more incoherent. Long nonsensical screeds on why she should have won that contest instead of you. Her latest argument is that you're an evil witch who has the Fiery Boys under a

magical spell." Kira paused. "Can you teach me how to do that?"

I giggled. "I don't have that particular power, but wow can I tell stories. Wait for them."

"No problem. Besides, I have to go. I'll keep you posted on the outside world."

"Thanks, Kira." We hung up.

I had been sitting on Chuck's orgy bed in the back of the bus. The bed was unmade, a jumble of sheets, blankets, and pillows. As I stared more closely, I noticed a discolored patch on a sheet. That was enough—I got up from the bed. It had always surprised me that nobody slept in this spacious and comfortable bedroom, but I now understood the reason. Chuck came by every day and made a mess of the place. Nobody wanted to sleep here, not even him. This was just his sex pad—such a waste.

I returned to the living room for more of my romp-free week on the Fiery Boys tour bus.

## **Twenty-One**



We pulled into Denver during the last rays of sunlight, and Chuck wandered over to the waiting fans for his special kind of entertainment. The rest of us went to the arena so Gabe could check out the space. Buck wandered through the seats while River, Gabe, and I went up on the stage. As we returned to the bus, Vaughan pulled Buck aside. "There's someone waiting for you."

Buck arched an eyebrow and folded his arms. "Who?"

"She says she's your wife. Jason told me to let her in, but I thought you should know." Buck dropped his head and groaned, clearly unhappy to see Danielle. This was the woman who broke his heart and was widely believed to have killed the band. And although I doubted she was wholly responsible for the band's demise, I still wasn't her biggest fan.

Then I realized something—I actually wanted to meet her. After all, I was here on the bus with the Fiery Boys, and Danielle was an essential element of this band. I might not be going home with any sexual conquests in my pocket, but I was collecting some incredible stories. Why not meet Danielle?

Reluctant to push myself into her face too quickly, I let the others board, then I waited a few minutes before climbing up. Danielle sat at the living room table next to Gabe, chatting and passing a joint between them. She looked exactly as she had ten years ago, cute and trim, with a full head of curly blonde hair. Chuck, River, and Buck were gone, probably hiding in their cubicles. I wondered if bad-tempered Buck had said anything to her.

When she saw me, Danielle smiled. "So you're the contest winner." She gave me an appraising once-over, nodding with what seemed like approval. Then she patted the seat next to her, so I sat down. "Are you enjoying tour hell?" I figured she should know.

Gabe sent the joint back to her, and she took a puff before offering to it me. Although I'd avoided getting high with Gabe up to this point, nothing was the same anymore. A little extra fun wouldn't be so bad. So I took a drag and got high with the closeted guitarist and the reclusive bass player's wife. Yeah, that sounded about right.

Danielle leaned close and whispered, "Heard you fucked Chuck." She gave me a throaty laugh, and I couldn't help but join in.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I haven't?"

Gabe finished the joint and left its remains in the ashtray. He leaned back with his eyes closed. Either he was more blissed out than normal, or, more likely, he was enjoying eavesdropping on this conversation. Danielle leaned closer to me and smiled. "According to the web, you got Chuck's name tattooed on your breast."

This time, I really laughed. "Let me guess—you've been reading Inferna's site. That woman is full of lies. Sorry, no tattoo, no sex with Chuck, and definitely not in love." I turned to face her. "Did they used to say that about you? Did they report that you had 'Buck' tattooed on your breast?"

"No, but if I'd gotten such a tattoo, it wouldn't have said 'Buck.' Hell, that's not even his name. I call him Charlie, like his family does. All his friends called him Chuck back in high school. Of course, Lord Jason made him change that."

Everyone knew that Buck and Chuck were both named Charles. I'd always assumed that Buck had taken that name for artistic reasons. But now I could see that, like so much else in this band, it all came down to Jason's dictatorial control. As I suspected, Danielle was definitely worth meeting.

Curious to know more, I waded carefully into the sea of Buck. "Has he always been so closed-off and angry?"

She tightened her mouth. "He wasn't back then. I think it's mostly my fault these days. Divorce is touchy business. I feel bad about it."

"Do you miss him?"

"No more than I have for the last seven or eight years." I was sad that she and Buck hadn't been close. It had to be hard being with a famous rocker.

I nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that. I don't know how you handled all the abuse. I've been roasted alive, and it's been less than a week. How did you put up with it for years?"

"I didn't. I couldn't stand it. It didn't bother me that Charlie spent so much time writing music and practicing. But the parties were nauseating. Drunk half-dressed women everywhere. And every one of them hated me for taking away their precious Buck. The male fans wouldn't get close either, since I was taken. If it weren't for Gabe, I wouldn't have had anyone to talk to back then. I'm telling you, I was a band widow. I spent most of my time either on the road and hating it, or home and lonely. It sucked."

"So what brings you to the tour bus?"

She shrugged. "I travel a lot these days, and I was in Denver to meet with a client. Thought I'd check up on the boy. He might be pissed at me, but I don't hate him anymore. It's time for both of us to move on with our lives,

so I came to wish him well. We'll be officially divorced soon, you know. So go ahead and have sex with him if you want."

I bolted to attention so hard I thought my head would snap off. Danielle was full of surprises, including the ridiculous notion that I was going to bag her soon-to-be ex husband. I laughed and stared at her with wide-open eyes. "Yeah, that'll be the day."

Now it was Danielle's turn to be surprised. "Wait! You two haven't hooked up?"

"Hell no! He stays far away from me."

Danielle squinted at me for a few seconds then got up and wandered toward the back of the bus. "Charlie? Where are vou?"

Buck poked his head out of his cubicle and growled at her. "What do you want?"

She stared at him for a few seconds, then shrugged. "Oh never mind. Have a good show tomorrow." She gave him a wave of her hand, then turned away. When she got back to the living room, she blew a kiss to Gabe, and they waved at each other. Then she gave me a hug. "Nice to meet you. Can you do me a favor?"

"Uh. sure."

She pulled an envelope from her purse and handed it to me. "Give this to Charlie." Before I could protest that I was the last person on this bus to deliver anything to Buck, she had climbed down the steps and left.

I headed toward Buck's cubicle to deliver the letter and get it over with, but I heard him muttering and cursing at Danielle. Now was not a good time, and I was a little looped from the pot so I didn't want to confront him. I stashed the letter in my cubicle and went back to the living room.

#### 152 Sage Ardman

Sitting with Gabe, I decided to learn more of Danielle's story. I knew he'd tell me the truth. "So did she have any part in the band's break up?"

"No." Gabe shook his head. "The band died because it had a narrow demographic. We were known as the rocking sixteen year olds, young and full of energy. We quickly became the latest teen heartthrob band, especially among other sixteen year olds." He gave me a tight grin. "Like you."

Gabe took a long breath. "But for some reason, we *only* connected with teenagers. Older people couldn't care less about us. That's why we died. We didn't have broad-enough appeal."

"That makes sense, but what about Danielle?"

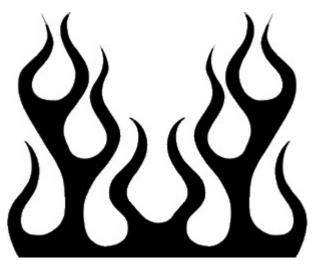
"The Buck and Danielle story had little to do with our breakup. We didn't care about his love life. But she did break his heart. She couldn't handle all the negative media attention—who could? It ruined her, and she took him down with it."

"Good thing I'm leaving soon."

"Good for you. Sad for me—I'll miss you. River likes you, too. And Buck. . ." Gabe looked up and shook his head. "He's actually going to miss you, too."

Somehow, I doubted that.

# Day Six



### **Twenty-Two**



The band had already set up yesterday for tonight's show, so there was nothing left to do today. River and Gabe wanted to go up into the Rocky Mountains for a little sightseeing. River loved the outdoors, and I figured Gabe just wanted to get higher. Buck and Chuck were interested too, which surprised me because I thought Chuck would prefer to power through another bed full of groupies.

I was definitely fine with the idea of getting away from the arena and the insistent pressure of fans. It seemed like a welcome diversion. So they decided to enlist Big Tim to drive us on the tour bus, out of the city and up into the mountains. Naturally, Jason loved the idea of our tour bus rolling through the countryside, advertising the band.

We got on the road, and Gabe lit up a joint. Chuck took a few shots of tequila, and the rest of us went for some beer and soda.

At one point, just before the second round of drinks hit the table, Buck changed into a ratty Fiery Boys T-shirt with a picture of Chuck on it. I regarded the singer's face with some level of curiosity. "Since when are you a fan of Chuck's?"

Buck grinned. "This is my beer-drinking shirt. Watch..." He set the bottles on the table and opened them, using the shirt to twist off the caps. Each time he opened another bottle, the shirt tore a little more. Chuck's picture was starting to look like the victim in a horror movie. I have to admit I appreciated each new rip, because it let me see

more and more of Buck's fine body. He might be difficult, but he was phenomenally hot.

I had a fresh bottle of beer in my hand and was about to propose a toast to the band when the bus suddenly slowed down and pulled to the side of the road. Gabe got up to talk to Big Tim, then came back and collapsed on the sofa. "Bad news. The engine's overheated, and we're stuck for a while. Big Tim's calling for service."

I got up from my seat, excited by the thought of a broken engine. To me, they'd always been interesting puzzles, fun to solve. And this engine was even more interesting because it was sure to be huge. I'd never worked on a bus.

Big Tim was outside, so I left the bus to go find him. I was wearing a casual outfit today, blue jeans and a black Tshirt. I used to dress like this ten years ago when Zed and I would work on engines. Except that the shirt I wore then was my work shirt, so it was already stained with grease and oil. Now I had on clean clothes, and I was ready to check out this new toy. I found Big Tim at the back of the bus.

"Hey, Annalisa." He nodded toward the steam issuing from the grill. "Overheated."

I pointed to the colorful liquid pooling on the ground. "Spewing coolant."

"Yeah, let's take a look. The mechanic will figure it out for sure." He popped open a panel, exposing a large, hot engine. We stepped back to admire the enormity of it.

Buck wandered out to join us. Big Tim nodded at him then turned back to the engine and sighed. "Gotta open the radiator and let it cool. But I need a rag—that sucker's hot." He started to go back to the bus, but Buck stopped him.

"Here, use my shirt. It's garbage, anyway." He peeled off the torn Fiery Boys T-shirt and tossed it to Big Tim, happy to send Chuck's image to its final resting place.

I'd already been admiring Buck's pumped body, but with the shirt off, I let myself indulge. His muscles looked more than fine in the sunlight. A little of my teenage love for him started to return, and for a brief moment, I forgot about the angry and withdrawn bass player I'd known all week.

Big Tim bunched up the shirt and reached into the steaming engine to loosen the radiator cap. Then, with a yelp, he leapt back as much more steam billowed out. "Gotta let this sucker cool off for a while." He offered the shirt back to Buck but it was filthy now, so Buck waved it away. Big Tim dropped it on the ground and wandered off.

Alone with Buck, I sneaked one last look at his superfine body then turned to face the engine. I didn't need to get him started again. The steam vented for a while, and soon I could see the massive motor. "Wonder why it overheated?" I picked up Buck's T-shirt so I could poke around.

He squinted at me. "You know what you're doing?"

"A little." I shrugged. "I've worked on plenty of car engines. Don't forget that I sell them for a living." I stepped back and wiped sweat from my forehead. "I'll tell you one thing. All the engines on the showroom floor are much cleaner than your tour bus." Even Zed's old cars had cleaner engines than this monstrosity.

I turned to Buck and took a stab at conversation with Mr. Grumpy-head. "What about you? Know anything about engines?"

"Some." Buck swayed his head from side to side. "Could be a coolant leak. We'll find out when they fill it up."

I nodded toward the coolant on the ground. "If it's a leak, it can't be too bad or else there'd be nothing left to spill out. Must be something else." I approached the engine and poked around some more, gingerly guiding my hand around hot engine parts. I checked the oil level, but it wasn't low and looked relatively clean. The hoses looked good, too. I'd have checked the thermostat if it wasn't still too hot to touch. Besides, there wasn't much I could do without a decent toolkit.

The shirt caught on something and tore even more—it was definitely garbage now. I pulled it free and tossed it away. Then I stepped back to admire this huge machine. With the steam gone now, I could see it clearly. Belts and hoses and wires ran everywhere, filthy and hot.

But as I stared at the engine, I noticed something unusual. The belts. In a car engine, you can't see all of them because they're always tucked into the hood. But here on the bus, I could see every belt as it wound back and forth. And one of them was sagging. Where it should have run in a rigidly straight line, I noticed a tiny amount of curvature.

"Look at this. . ." I reached in to wiggle the slack belt. "Here's the problem."

Buck nodded. "Loose fan belt." He tugged on the belt, then his eyes narrowed on me. "Nice work. You do know engines. You're really good."

Ooh, a compliment! I didn't think he was capable of that. "You know, that's the nicest thing you've said to me." I gave him a smirk.

"Fuck that!" He propped his fists on his hips. "I've been nice to you. I got the audience to like you."

"Okay, that was nice. But you've been withdrawn and testy all week." It started to spill out of me now. Six days of angry Buck, brooding, picking fights, getting drunk, and hiding in his cubicle. It was push-back time, so I let him have it.

"I know you didn't want me to be on tour with the band, but I'm here. So why couldn't you just *get over it*?" I may have yelled that last part.

I could not figure out Buck. Did he like me or did he hate me? I wanted to grab him and shake him and demand that he explain himself, because whatever was going on inside his head was making me feel bad. I'd be leaving the tour soon, so it was long past time to figure this out.

But what could I do that would pierce Buck's walls and show him how I felt? The answer came instantly. With a satisfying laugh, I wiped my greasy hand on his too-perfect chest, leaving a shiny black streak. Hah! Take that!

"Oh, nice." Buck looked down with a grin. Then he reached his own dirty hand out and wiped a line of grime across my cheek. I guess I should have expected something like that.

"You bastard." I lunged for his grinning face to give him another swipe, but he caught my wrists. His smug smile dared me to escape, so I struggled against his grip with my greasy fingers wiggling at him. Of course, he held me easily, which made him smile even more. Damn him! We remained in this standoff for a long time, staring hard at each other.

Finally, after taking a deep breath, Buck loosened his grip. This freed me to resume the battle, so I reached for his face, ready to paint him with more black grease. As my hands landed on his face, his hands grabbed mine. The battle was on.

Then I noticed something unusual. Buck's hands were on my face, but they weren't smearing soot. Instead, they were relaxed and gentle and held my face tenderly. Also, he looked different. His usual anger had washed away, leaving him looking serious and calm.

His look also had a new aspect to it. A wisp of a smile that I had seen a long time ago on the old Buck, the one whose poster hung above my bed. I didn't understand it then and I didn't understand it now. But I'd always liked it.

None of this made sense. I kept waiting for him to grumble about something, but he never said a word. His bright blue eyes practically devoured me, and if I didn't know better, I'd have said he was about to give me a kiss.

So it shouldn't have been such a shock when he did.

## **End of Free Preview**



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## **Fiery Boys**

## 2014 Tour Schedule



Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					May 30 Boston	May 31 New York City
June 1 New York City	June 2 Pittsburgh	June 3	June 4 Detroit	June 5 Chicago	June 6 Chicago	June 7 Minne- apolis
June 8 Kansas City	June 9	June 10 Denver	June 11 Denver	June 12	June 13 Salt Lake City	June 14 Boise
June 15 Seattle	June 16 Seattle	June 17	June 18 Portland	June 19	June 20 San Francisco	June 21 San Francisco
June 22 San Jose	June 23 San Jose	June 24	June 25 Los Angeles	June 26 Los Angeles	June 27 Las Vegas	June 28 Phoenix
June 29 Albu- querque	June 30	July 1 Dallas	July 2 Dallas	July 3 Houston	July 4 New Orleans	July 5 Atlanta
July 6 Atlanta	July 7	July 8 Charlotte	July 9 DC			

### **About the Author**



After completing my *Westerley* trilogy, I didn't have to think very hard about what to write about next: rock and roll! It was an obvious choice, because I was once the lead singer of a California garage band. Of course, the things that happen in this book never happened to me, but it was fun to pretend.

After a lifetime of reading general fiction, I discovered romance at age 59 and fell in love with it. Now I fill my time reading and writing romance novels.

Life in Northern California is full of surprises, including my novels. I have been happily married for over thirty years, and we have raised two wonderful children. I honestly wouldn't trade places with anyone else, living or dead, real or imagined.