

"Introductions"
LA Henderson

"Gurl, I've gots someone you *hafta* meet!"

I slowed my hip circle when I heard her, the smile melting slowly off my face. I'd know that slangy, officious voice anywhere, even in this din. Perhaps if I ignored the woman, kept on dancing, she'd go away, and I'd be spared her meddling for the night.

Uh-huh. Maybe once the world ended.

Rather than obliging me, my roommate grabbed my shoulder, her touch stiffening my spine with cold, and spun me around to face her looming visage.

"Serzisly, Carmen! Yuh've gotsta meet this dude! He's perfect sex made *incahrnit*, and he's curious about YOU!" She grinned wickedly. "He just about swooned on backwards when I told him I could gitz him a face-to-face wit yooh!"

I didn't bother to suppress a groan. She wouldn't hear it over the music anyways.

"ANOTHER fiddler on the roof, Anna?" I shook my head, irritated that she'd interrupted my dancing for this, though aware that she wouldn't be able to see the motion down in the shadows of the crowd. "I'm so not interested in meeting another one of your so-called 'sex-made-incarnates.'"

She tugged impatiently at my arm, already scoping a path through the writhing throng.

"This one's different. He's PUHFECT sex made incarnate. Now, come on!"

It would be easier to just do as she wished, though we must have made a comical sight, me taking three steps to every one of hers. We two have always been utterly mismatched.

"Here my shorty is!" Anna stopped suddenly and my nose met with her second rib with a silent but painful protest. "Carmen Betty, pohtent, provackative, and purrrfect."

I grimaced, massaging my nose. Owww.... I still didn't know who I was being introduced to, but I was fairly sure it didn't really matter. After all, Anna was worse than my parents, always pushing me at someone or something.

"It's nice to meet you," a pleasantly masculine voice rumbled as a hand glided into my field of vision.

I froze, my hand still attempting to comfort abused cartilage.

It was quite a nice hand, actually, with a callused palm and a hitchhiker's thumb, the type of hand that makes a girl's body itching-ly curious. It was attached to a bare arm with just the hint of the curves that muscles make. My eyes seemed helpless but to follow those curves up to the shadowed line of a t-shirt, to the swooping hollows of a throat, to a... face.

Woah. That level of public sexiness had to be illegal in at least three states.

"I'm Repens Lantana," he said, smiling at me, wreaking havoc with my internal organs, and then proffering his hand again.

My mouth was doubtless hanging open as my hand drifted down into his grasp. It took strenuous effort to pull myself from the fantasies he was inciting and to bully my lips into forming recognizable words.

"Um... Uh... Do... Do you go to the University?" I managed.

Repens smiled at me again, cocking his head to the side. My mouth went dry and I licked my lips.

"Yes, actually," he replied. "I'm a junior, a biology major." He winked. "I'm also a regular at this club, where I often admire your dancing. You're quite good, you know."

The blood rushed happily to my cheeks, a welcome change from where it had been heading. Repens had noticed my dancing? Repens had thought I was good at dancing?

Oh, God. All heat drained away. He'd noticed my dancing. I didn't think anyone noticed my dancing. I loved to dance - it made me feel sexy, wild, free - but I knew that I danced like a stripper, even though I kept my clothes on. If Repens wanted to meet me based off that, then he probably just wanted in my pants. Oh, I didn't think anyone noticed-

"Hey, don't panic." His hand slid up my arm to my shoulder, so pleasantly warm, the only thing I could really feel right then, his palm spanning over my right collarbone. "I'm not stalking you or anything like that."

But he had seen my dancing, he had admired my dancing, he had noticed. It was only a matter of time before he told people about

me, and then word would spread, and soon everyone would know. They'd whisper about me then, loud and laughing, and I'd be back in high school, my name scribbled in bathroom stalls: "Carmen Betty is a whore," even though I'd never done anything but love to dance, too afraid they were right.

And the next time my parents came to visit, maybe someone would say something to them, or they'd see, and then they would know that I was still the same; I hadn't changed. They'd be ashamed of me again, look at me sadly and condemn me for what I was. Oh, I had told them I had changed!

"Carmen?" Concern now, in Repens's voice, concern for the girl with too many curves and too risqué moves. And she didn't deserve anything of his, not his time, not his attention, certainly not his concern, the filthy tramp, not even a little itty teeny tiny bit, because she'd been imagining what that hand on her shoulder might be able to do in other places. "Are you okay?"

But I wasn't okay, I've NEVER been okay, not since the day I started dancing and found out what I really was.

"It's nice to meet you," I ran out, twisting to get away from him, from the temptation, "but I have to go."

But Carmen," Anna protested, "you hasta MEET—"

But I was already moving, running, going somewhere, anywhere, away from the situation, falling in time with the music without thinking, All-American Reject's "Dirty Little Secret."

"These sleeping dogs won't lay, and now I've tried too hard...."

The bathroom. As I dashed through the door, the bartender came out.

"Careful," she cautioned. "The mirror's broken."

It didn't matter. I locked the door behind me and curled over the sink, my tears making the little shards heaped there glisten and seem to cry themselves. Oh, I had to be damned, always a slut and always loving it until I realized it, no matter how I struggled to be respectable, to be someone my parents could approve of. I cried harder as the weight of judgment crushed my stomach and the taste of bile flooded my mouth. It tasted so horrible, so bitter, so natural; like I'd always had that taste there, like I'd always been dancing, like I'd always been lost.

I cried myself out.

When I was done, able to see again, I stared down into the sink. It was clogged with glass trying to slip down into the drain and not quite succeeding, my tears mixing in. Floating bits of mirror winked at me, all showing broken reflections of my face, cut off at the jagged edges.

"Carmen!" Anna's voice. "There's still someone you've gotta meet!"

I took a deep breath and let that push me up straight. There was a hole above the sink, slate gray metal, rusting over, empty where the mirror obviously should be. It was a dull, depressing sight, but it seemed to whisper to me, telling me something forbidden.

"Carmen?" Anna again. "Come on!"

I didn't know how she was going to say it to me, but I knew the message, always inconsistent and always the same - always wrong.

And I knew it.

And I wasn't the only one who knew it either. The broken images in the sink, trickling away with my tears, knew it was wrong, the rusting empty frame knew it was wrong, the sink itself, groaning in its pipes, knew it was wrong, the buzzing fluorescent light illuminating it all knew it was wrong.

It was time to stop listening to Anna, because I now stood, exhausted and exalted, face-to-face with whom I had become.