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**COMPULSION**

A silhouette of a person standing on a beach at sunset, with a large building in the background. The scene is bathed in the warm, orange and red light of the setting sun. The person is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the frame, looking out towards the horizon. The building in the background is a large, multi-story structure with a prominent central tower or spire, partially obscured by the haze of the sunset.

**AN ALEX DELAWARE NOVEL**



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by  
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# I

Kat loved breaking the rules.

*Don't talk to strangers.*

She'd talked to plenty of them tonight. Danced with a few, too. If you could call the way those losers moved dancing. The big, scary consequence: a stomped toe, courtesy of a loser in a red shirt.

*Don't go crazy mixing your drinks.*

Then how did you account for Long Island Iced Tea, which was basically everything tossed together and the best buzz in the world?

She'd had three tonight. Plus the tequila shots and the raspberry beer and the weed the guy in the retro bowling shirt had offered her. Not to mention . . . hard to remember. Whatever.

*Don't drink and drive.*

Yeah, great plan. What was she supposed to do tonight, let one of those *losers* drive her Mustang home?

The *plan* was Rianna would limit herself to two drinks and be the designated wheel-girl so Kat and Bethie could party. Only Bethie and Rianna hooked up with a couple fake-o blond guys in fake-o Brioni shirts. Brothers, some kind of surfboard business in Redondo.

*We're thinking maybe we'll go party with Sean and Matt, giggle, giggle. If that's cool with you, Kat.*

What was she supposed to say? Stay with me, I'm the ultimate loser?

So here she was three, four a.m., staggering out of the Light My Fire, looking for her car.

God, it was so dark, why the hell didn't they have outside lights or something . . . ?

She took three steps and one of her spike-heels caught on the asphalt and she stumbled, nearly twisting her ankle.

Fighting for balance, she righted herself.

Saved by quick reflexes, Supergirl. Also all those dancing lessons she'd been forced into. Not that she'd ever admit it to Mother, giving her fuel for more I-told-you-so bullshit.

Mother and her rules. No white after Labor Day. *That* made sense in L.A.

Kat took two more steps and one of the spaghetti straps on her plum lamé top fell off her shoulder. She left it that way, liking the kiss of the night air on her bare skin.

Feeling a little bit sexy, she flipped her hair, then remembered she'd had it cut, not much to flip.

Her vision blurred – how many Long Islands had she polished off? Maybe four.

Taking a deep cleansing breath, she felt her head clear.

Then it clouded again. And cleared. Like shutters being opened and closed. Crazy, maybe that weed

was messed up . . . where was the Mustang . . . she walked faster, tripped again, and Supergirl reflexes weren't enough and she had to grab out for something – the side of a car . . . not hers, crappy little Honda or something . . . where was the *Mustang*?

With only a few cars in the lot, it should've been easy to spot. But the darkness screwed everything up . . . losers who owned the Light My Fire too damn cheap to invest in some spots, like they weren't making enough packing the bodies in, the bouncers and velvet ropes a big joke.

Cheap bastards. Like all men.

Except Royal. Would you believe that, Mother finally lucking out big-time? Who knew the old girl had it in her?

Kat laughed out loud at the image. Something *in* Mother.

Not likely, Royal was in the bathroom every ten minutes. Didn't that mean a screwed-up prostate?

She lurched across the inky lot. The sky was so black she couldn't even see the chain-link fence surrounding the lot, or the warehouses and storage lots that made up this crappy neighborhood.

The club's Web site said it was in Brentwood. More like the hairy, stinky armpit of West L.A. . . . okay, there it was, her stupid Mustang.

She hurried toward the car, heels clacking against knobby asphalt. Each impact set off little echoes that reminded her of when she was seven and Mother forced her to take tap.

When she finally got there, she groped in her purse for her keys, found them. Dropped them.

She heard the rattle as they landed, but it was too dark to see where. Bending sharply, she teetered, braced herself with one hand to the ground, and searched with the other.

Nowhere.

Squatting, she smelled something chemical – gasoline, like when you fill up your car and no matter how many times you wash your hands afterward you can't get rid of the stink.

A fuel leak? That's all she needed.

Six thousand miles and the car was nothing but problems. She'd thought it was cool at first, but decided it was lame and stopped making payments. Hello, Re-po Man. Again.

*We took care of the down payment, Katrina. All you had to do was remember on the fifteenth of each . . .*

Where were the goddamn keys! She scraped her knuckles on the ground. A fake nail popped off and that made her feel like crying.

Ah, got it!

Struggling to her feet, she flicked the remote, dropped into the driver's seat, started up the engine. The car balked, then kicked in and *here we go Supergirl* she was driving straight into the black night – oh, yeah, put on the headlights.

Slowly, with a drunk's exaggerated care, she coasted, missed the exit, backed up, passed through. Turning south onto Corinth Avenue, she made her

way to Pico. The boulevard was totally empty and she turned onto it. Oversteered, ended up on the wrong side of the road, swerved and compensated, finally got the stupid car in the lane.

At Sepulveda, she hit a red light.

No cars at the intersection. No cops.

She ran it.

Sailing north, she felt free, like the whole city – the whole *world* was hers.

Like someone had dropped a nuke and she was the last survivor.

Wouldn't *that* be cool, she could drive over to Beverly Hills, run a gazillion red lights, waltz into the Tiffany store on Rodeo and scoop up whatever she wanted.

A planet without people. She laughed.

She crossed Santa Monica and Wilshire and kept going until Sepulveda turned into the Pass. Off to her left was the 405, just a scatter of taillights. On the other side was hillside that bled into moonless sky.

No lights on in gazillion-dollar hill houses full of sleeping rich people. The same kind of idiots she had to deal with at La Femme.

Women like Mother, pretending they weren't shriveling or fat as pigs.

Thinking about work made Kat tense up and she deep-breathed. That made her burp real loud and she cracked up, drove faster.

At this rate, she'd be over the hill and at her apartment real soon.

Stupid little dump in Van Nuys, but she told everyone it was Sherman Oaks because it was on the border and who cared?

All of a sudden her eyes began to close and she had to shake herself awake. A hard shove down on the gas pedal and the car shot forward.

*Saaiiling . . . You go, girl!*

Seconds later, the Mustang sputtered, whined, stopped.

She managed to steer to the right, stop just off the road. Let the car sit for a sec and tried again.

Nothing but a whiny noise.

Two more attempts, then five.

*Shit!*

It took a while to find the switch for the interior lights and when she brightened the car, her head hurt and she saw little yellow things dancing in front of her eyes. When they cleared, she looked at the gas gauge.

## E

*Shit shit shit!* How had that happened, she could swear—

Mother's voice nagged at her. She put her hands over her ears and tried to think.

Where was the nearest gas station . . . nowhere, nothing for miles.

She punched the dashboard so hard it hurt her hands. Cried, sat back, drained.

Realizing she was exposed by the interior lights, she switched them off.

Now what?

Call the Triple A! Why hadn't she thought of that?

It took what seemed like a long time to find her cell phone in her purse. Even longer to locate her Triple A card.

Tapping out the toll-free number was hard because even with the phone light the numbers were teeny and her hands were shaky.

When the operator answered, she read off her membership code. Had to do it twice because her eyes had blurred and it was hard to see what was a 3 and what was an 8.

The operator put her on hold, came back and said her membership had lapsed.

Kat said, 'No way.'

'Sorry, ma'am, but you haven't been active for eighteen months.'

'That's frickin' impossible—'

'I'm sorry, ma'am, but—'

'Like hell you are—'

'Ma'am, there's no reason to be—'

'Like hell there isn't.' Kat clicked off.

*Now* what?

Think, think, think – okay, plan B: Call Bethie's cell and if that interrupted something, too frickin' bad.

The phone rang five times before Bethie's voice mail kicked in.

Kat hung up. Her phone went dead.  
Jabbing the *Power* button did nothing.  
That brought back a vague memory of something  
she'd neglected.

Charging up before she went out tonight – how  
the *hell* had she forgotten?

Now her whole *body* was shaking and her chest  
was tight and she was sweating.

She double-checked to make sure the car was  
locked.

Maybe a highway patrol dude would come by.  
What if another car did?

*Don't talk to strangers.*

What was her choice, sleeping here all night?

She nearly fell asleep before the first car showed  
up, speeding toward her, headlights startling her.

Big Range Rover; good.

Kat waved out the window. Bastard sped right  
by.

A couple of minutes later, headlights brightened  
her rearview and enlarged. This vehicle stopped  
right next to her.

Crappy pickup, stuff piled in the back, under a  
tarp.

The passenger window rolled down.

Young Mexican guy. Another Mexican sat at the  
wheel.

They looked at her funny.

The passenger got out. Small and scruffy.

Kat slid down low in her seat and when the

Mexican came over and said something through the glass, she pretended he wasn't there.

He stood there, really freaking her out.

Kat kept making believe she was invisible and the Mexican finally returned to the pickup.

It took five minutes after the truck drove away before she was able to sit up and breathe normally. She'd wet her thong. Rolled it off her butt and down her legs and tossed it into the backseat.

Soon as the undies made contact, her luck turned.

*A Bentley!*

Screw you, Range Rover!

Big, black, and glossy, that aggressive grille.

And slowing down!

Oh shit, what if it was Clive?

Even if it *was* Clive, she could handle it, better than sleeping here all—

As the Bentley rolled to a halt, she opened the window, tried to get a look at who was inside.

The big black car idled, moved on.

Damn you, rich bastard!

She jumped out of the Mustang, waved frantically.

The Bentley stopped. Backed up.

Kat tried to make herself look safe by shrugging and smiling and pointing to her car.

The Bentley's window lowered silently.

Just a driver inside.

Not Clive, a woman!

*Thank you, God!*

Kat said, ‘Ma’am,’ in the syrupy voice she used at La Femme. ‘Thank you so much for stopping. I ran out of gas and if you could just take me somewhere where I could maybe find a—’

‘Certainly, dear,’ said the woman. Throaty voice, like that actress Mother liked . . . Lauren Lauren . . . Hutton? No, Bacall. Lauren Bacall had rescued her!

Kat approached the Bentley.

The woman smiled at her. Older than Mother, with silver hair, huge pearl earrings, classy makeup, a tweed suit, some sort of silk scarf, purple, looked expensive, draped over her shoulders in that casual way that came easy to the classy ones.

What Mother pretended to be.

‘Ma’am, I really appreciate this,’ said Kat, suddenly wanting this woman to *be* her mother.

‘Get in, dear,’ said the woman. ‘We’ll find you some petrol.’

*Petrol – a Brit.*

A frickin’ aristocrat in a frickin’ *Bentley*.

Kat got in, beaming. What had started off as a shitty night was going to end up a cool story.

As the Bentley glided away, Kat thanked the woman again.

The woman nodded and switched on the stereo. Something classical – God what a sound system, it was like being in a concert hall.

‘If there’s any way I can repay you . . .’

'That won't be necessary, dear.'

Big-framed woman, sturdy bejeweled hands.

Kat said, 'Your car's *incredible*.'

The woman smiled and turned up the volume.

Kat sat back and closed her eyes. Thought of Rianna and Bethie with the fake-o shirts.

Telling *this* story was going to be delicious.

The Bentley cruised silently up the Pass. Cushy seats, alcohol, weed, and the adrenaline drop plunged Kat into sudden, nearly comatose sleep.

She was snoring loudly when the car made a turn, climbed smoothly into the hills.

Headed for a dark, cold place.