

# ~ Memories of the Heart ~

by Ali Vali

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If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed, please find more appropriate material.

Sit back and enjoy the story, any comments can be sent to me at [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com).

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Beth, Len, and Bunny, you are all godsend. I bow to your grammatical knowledge and for your very prompt turnaround, especially this time around. Two days wasn't a lot, but you guys did it.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the wonderful people who take the time to read these stories. Thank you for all the great notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

*This is dedicated, as always, to the one woman who holds my heart. As in all things you've taught me to enjoy life and to live it so no day is ever wasted. To me every second with you is a treasure, so I'm extremely lucky, and it becomes clearly to me with each passing day.*

October 2005

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## **A Special Note of Thanks to the Readers**

Over the last couple of months I've received a slew of wonderful notes asking how we're doing after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Each and every one of them was a treasure that has helped us through this hard and strange time, so on behalf of my partner and I, please accept our heartfelt thanks. Your thoughts, prayers, offers of assistance and well wishes were extremely appreciated.

To the many of you who wrote wanting to read more of Piper and Kendal, I want to apologize. With the clean up at the house and editing "The Devil Inside," the novel I have coming out in January with Bold Strokes Books, time just got away from me. The other thing is that Piper and Kendal are busy ripping out drywall, insulation, flooring and tending to a new baby so they've taken a break from fighting evil. Unless you've been down here and seen some of the mold growing on the walls, it's evil incarnate I tell you.

This Halloween I wanted to introduce you to a new set of characters that are more romantic based than scary, and live in a pre-Katrina New Orleans. As many of you are aware, a majority of the places I mention in the stories aren't fiction, and the restaurants are some of my favorites.

So if you come for a visit, give the city a few months so that the restaurants and places I mention can get their roofs repaired, and their suppliers back on line. If you have a craving for coffee and donuts though, Café DuMonde is open and as wonderful as ever, and the only hurricanes we have brewing now are being served in those nice curvy glasses down at Pat O'Brien's on Bourbon Street.

We wish all of you a safe and happy Halloween, and I hope you enjoy the story.

Ali

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### **New York - March**

"It's up to eighty-seven." The young man's eyes never left the scrolling numbers on the computer screen and the hangnail he'd ripped off of his thumb with his teeth was now bleeding. "Briar, did you hear me? It's up to eighty-seven fifty-three."

"Timothy, do you know why you won't make it in this business?" While her employee scanned the stock numbers, Briar Kilston studied the New York skyline from her office window seventy stories up.

"For God's sake, it's at ninety, we should sell." He had long since started on his index finger ripping the nail so viciously he had to stop and shake out his hand from the sudden self inflicted pain.

"You have no sense of timing and you have no balls. Both are essential if you're shooting for the big game around here." She stretched her feet out in front of her and put her hands behind her head, the total picture of relaxation. It was almost a comical study in opposites. "My father was fond of saying you should be locked and loaded, and ready to pull the trigger but only when you were sure you were going to make a killing. I don't sense a kill shot just yet."

"It's back to eighty-nine seventeen."

Briar picked up her phone and punched in the number to the floor of the stock exchange. "Tony, pop them for another twenty thousand. Make it quick, we're working against the bell now."

"Twenty thousand more? You're fucking insane," said Timothy.

She stood, took her jacket off and put on a drab gray one and put her credentials around her neck. The minute she walked onto the trading floor from their office building, the fury began. Kilston wouldn't be buying a dead stock so the other buyers didn't let her down and started the run she was counting on. When the bell finally rang she'd sold at ninety-seven and change.

When she made it back to the office Timothy was the first to try and offer his congratulations. Ten minutes later he was standing on the street holding a box of his possessions wondering where his day had gone so wrong. Briar couldn't work with anyone who didn't have the ambition not only to win, but also to completely annihilate everything and everyone who stood in your way to get that victory.

It was another lesson she'd learned early from her father. Because even though he'd founded the brokerage firm she now ran, Briar had started in the mailroom. The corner office had been earned one deal at a time.

Now that the non-believers had been dealt with, she started working the phones and finishing some numbers for the next day's conquests. Her assistant Shelia came in at ten and held up the long discarded jacket. She'd found early on that most times Briar needed a kick in the pants to call it a day.

This had only been Shelia's second job after graduating from junior college, but she doubted she'd run across anyone who was as much a workaholic as Briar. The brokers who finally made it out of the bullpen and into an office were the ones who worked as hard and put in the hours, but none of them topped their boss at the end of every week.

"You have a reservation with Claire in thirty minutes. If you leave now you might get lucky."

"With you or Claire?" asked Briar.

"I'm not the one filling up half your closet with designer clothes so let's go with Claire." She smoothed the shoulders of the jacket after Briar slipped it on, and accepted Briar's arm to the elevators. "And could you do me a favor?" she asked when the leather cigar holder came out.

"Name it."

"Order a salad with dinner. Even if you treat it like a center piece it'll make me feel better."

"Shelia, I'm too much of a bitch for anything to happen to me. Besides, if God had meant for people to eat things that are the color green they'd taste like beef."

"You walk me downstairs every night, buy me flowers every Monday, and never forget my birthday or any other important date. Don't give me some story about how bitchy you are. But fifteen hour days, a steady diet of red meat, cigars, scotch and a woman who could inspire frustration in Christ it shocks me that you're still here giving me a hard time."

Briar's car was waiting for them but Shelia declined a ride and smiled when Briar put her in a cab and paid more than enough for the fare. As long as her days were, it was these consistent kindnesses, that Briar rarely showed others, that kept Shelia loyal. The woman was a hard ass to work for but she was also generous to a fault if she cared about you.

"Remember the salad," she yelled as Briar closed the door for her.

She turned back as the cab pulled away to see Briar light the cigar and wave with a huge relaxed grin on her face. It was that smile on the strikingly attractive face that caught most people off guard at times. Briar in Shelia's opinion was good looking, not because of the shoulder length light brown hair, nor the pale blue eyes and tall build, but because none of those things seemed to

matter to her. Her boss was fond of saying it was just genetic luck and nothing more. It was Briar's compassion for others and her passion for life in general that made her attractive.

In their years together on the job, Shelia had never met anyone who loved life as much as her boss. She couldn't cook, but would take chances that people like Timothy thought were crazy. Briar was fond of saying food could be ordered out, but the thrill of winning when everyone bet against you couldn't be bought. She wasn't much for the outdoors, but had a love for sunsets and sunrises that no one would have guessed about her. The one thing that always surprised Shelia was that Briar didn't like the water. The ultimate risk taker had never learned to swim.

"Sweet idiot," was all Shelia could think to say as her ride turned the corner. She was looking forward to tomorrow when she knew she'd learn more about the enigma that was her boss. With each day that came, Briar never disappointed her on that.

### **New Orleans - Same Day**

"You remembered didn't you?"

Vivian Loreio cut the engine to the crew boat she was piloting when they were about five feet from the dock, knowing from experience they would coast in the rest of the way and gently tap rubber covered wood. Her job was shuttling offshore workers up and down the Mississippi River all day, along with supplies, but it was something she loved since it kept her on the water.

She had partnered in business with Alan Beniot and after a couple of years they owned the boat outright and made a fairly good living. The two had grown up together and were more like siblings than business partners and spent most of these trips having conversations just like the one they were engaged in.

"Of course I remembered," she said as she watched the ground crew tie them up.

It had been raining for most of the day and despite the cap she had on, Vivian's blond hair was plastered to the back of her neck. They sat just outside the wheelhouse and watched as the crew unloaded the empty containers they'd picked up that afternoon and put them on the dock. The constant light rain would make for a long ride home on her bicycle if it didn't let up so she was taking a moment to work herself up to mounting up.

"What'd you get her?" Alan put his feet on the railing and brought his cap down lower to keep the water out of his eyes.

"It's unique, so I'm not telling you until tomorrow. I don't want to jinx her not liking it by telling your ugly mug about it."

They had been business partners and friends for most of their life, but the one thing they'd butted heads on was Megan Beniot. The thirty-year-old kindergarten teacher was Alan's sister and Vivian's partner. At least that's how Vivian referred to her as, but Alan was waiting to see the ring and some type of act that would convince him his buddy was in for the long-term.

"It's been more than enough years, Viv, so I hope you put some thought into Megan's birthday present." He hunched over and cupped his hand in front of his mouth trying to light his cigarette. When he did he handed it over to share. "I want her to be happy."

She blew the smoke directly at him and waited to see if he was through with his lecture. "You think she isn't? Isn't happy I mean."

"I'm sure she is, but I know Megan, and she won't push very hard for the things she really wants."

"I wouldn't worry about it. Call me crazy but I think we want the same things out of life and you can always be sure that I'll take good care of her."

She took one last drag from his smoke before going back in to get her bag. The rain had let up a little but was still falling as she unlocked her bike and headed away from the river toward Lake Ponchartrain. There was a section close to the industrial section of town where a lucky few, interested in simple living, had founded a community of houseboats.

While a majority of the owners only came out on the weekends, Vivian and Megan lived on the water in the last slip on the long dock. It was cramped but Megan never had the heart to make her partner leave the serenity of the area.

There was the houseboat that Vivian loved, but her favorite possession was tied in the adjoining slip. A two-man catamaran that she lived to take out alone when the wind was really whipping since Megan was afraid of the neck breaking speed the boat was capable of. It was as close to freedom and flying as she would ever get without leaving the ground.

She waved to the few people sitting outside enjoying the sunset as she slowly pedaled down the dock. She could see Megan was sitting on the upper deck under the awning reading a book, seemingly lost in another adventure or romance.

"Hi, beautiful."

"Lousy day to be riding a bike, Viv."

Leaning her ride against a piling, Vivian climbed up and dropped into the empty chair. Megan's dachshund Mac was sleeping at her feet and stirred when Vivian's clothes let out a squishing noise and he responded with a lazy bark.

"Did you have a good day?" asked Vivian. She had intentionally not mentioned Megan's birthday earlier that morning to build the suspense.

"School was good and my kids gave me a collage they've been working on."

"I'm sure that was great, but wait till you see what the rest of the day has in store for you." She unzipped the backpack and pulled out a small box.

"You look as excited as my little ones." Megan accepted the box and just enjoyed holding it for a moment before lifting the lid.

"Happy birthday, babe. I know you think I forgot but I was just waiting to surprise you." Vivian motioned for her to look at her gift.

They had confessed their feelings for each other when they'd turned fourteen and it was the first time any of Vivian's gifts was small enough to be something as personal as jewelry. Not that she needed anything extravagant, it just wasn't Vivian's style, but after years of receiving things like bathmats and really cool kitchen gadgets, it would've been a welcomed change.

Slowly, as if to savor the moment, she lifted the lid and looked inside. Years of practice helped her put a pleasantly surprised expression on her face as she studied the box's contents. The thin piece of rope was tied in an intricate knot, the kind Vivian liked to practice as a way to relax, and it was sitting alone in the box.

"Thanks, honey." She held it up and smiled.

"It's a new knot I made up for you," Vivian took out a new piece of rope and started replicating the one in Megan's hand. "I wanted to give you something that would symbolize how you make me feel."

"I tie you up in knots?"

"Yeah," said Vivian as she handed over the new knot.

"Good to know, Viv." Her tone was light and amused since she realized Vivian meant the comment as a compliment. "You want to go out tonight?"

"Nah, let's just use up the leftovers from last night. The cat needs new sails so we're saving up."

It wasn't a good time to remind Vivian that, while she liked to sail as well, the boats weren't her first priority. But then it wasn't ever a good time. As true a heart as Vivian had, there was something missing from their relationship. Her birthday had made her realize that what was missing was passion.

For once Megan wanted to feel like the center of someone's universe and be swept off her feet. Then she realized how lucky she was that Vivian was so sweet and loyal, but the seed of want had been planted. Maybe today wasn't the day to talk about it, but it was coming, and like the storm that was raging at the center of the lake, it wouldn't be put off.

## **New York**

"Take your coat, Ms. Kilston?"

"Thanks." Briar shed the overcoat and handed it over. The place was still full despite the late

hour, but a trip to the bar, as much as she wanted to make one, wasn't possible since her table and her date were waiting.

"You might want to hang on to this," the manager held up a blue box with a white ribbon. He'd felt it before handing the coat over to one of his staff. "It looks important."

"Or like Shelia's been shopping for me again." She gave him a tip in exchange for the gift as she racked her brain for an important enough date to warrant a trip to Tiffany's.

He laughed as he slipped the money into his front pocket and started for her table. "Have a wonderful evening, Ms. Kilston."

Claire already had a drink in front of her but it was still fairly full. She liked the taste of a good Cosmopolitan but hated the calories. There was another drink set out for Briar, but that one was quickly drained.

"Hello, darling. Rough day?"

"Nothing to worry about. Besides, you hate talking about business," said Briar.

The waiter put down a fresh drink, and she used the interruption to study Clair's profile. Thin was always the first word that popped into her mind when she looked at the beautiful face. Not that there was anything wrong with thin, as all the romance novels prove, but there wasn't anything wrong with curves either.

"This is a special day so I thought I'd indulge you."

The comment prompted her to pull the gift out and slide it across the table. "No need to indulge anything but yourself, Claire."

"I knew you'd remember." Ignoring the comment, she reached for the box and immediately opened it.

"Of course I did." Briar figured this wouldn't be the time to pull out her Palm and put in a reminder to give Shelia a raise.

A diamond tennis bracelet came out of the box and sparkled beautifully in the low lighting of the restaurant. "I didn't realize you enjoyed our first date this much, darling." She handed the bracelet over and offered Briar her wrist. The gift was beautiful but Claire had to steel her face into a smile of surprise when she noticed the box was much larger than the one she was waiting for.

"It's a wonder I can think of anything else." As she closed the clasp a sudden feeling of sadness came over Briar.

Claire had just moved in one day and she hadn't thought to object, but there wasn't a burning

passion to be with this woman. It was nice to have someone to talk to at the end of the day when the mood hit her, or to have someone sitting across the table from you at dinner, but the overwhelming sense of love everyone talked about was absent.

Luckily Shelia kept Briar from being a disappointment to the women who'd come and gone in her life by shopping for gifts to fit the things she kept notes on just in case, but she was disappointed in herself for not ever taking the initiative to go out and do it. There had never been anyone she felt compelled to roam the counters at someplace like Tiffany's for. Stopping to pick out something that would make their eyes light up like the diamonds of Claire's gift just didn't enter her mind. She was sure it would do the same thing to those places in her heart that had been closed off for way to long if she took the time to care.

"Are you all right?" asked Claire. She had placed her order and it looked like Briar didn't even know the man was standing there much less talking to her.

"What? I'm sorry, I'm fine." She opened the menu and scanned down to the steak section. "A filet medium, garlic mashed potatoes and a house salad."

"A salad? That's new." Claire handed over her menu and turned to Briar like she had grown horns. "You're usually so boring when it comes to food."

"Then it's a good thing to order something out of the norm. I wouldn't want to be too predictable." She smiled and didn't care that it wasn't completely sincere.

The night had been enlightening in so many ways, and while she cared for Claire, the seed of want had been planted. It was time for someone to share a life with who would eclipse everything and everyone else, especially work. Because for now, it was the only thing that made her blood rush and made her look forward to her days.

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"Did she like it?" asked Shelia.

It was early, but the office was already full, and people were working the phones going over information from the foreign markets before they headed to the trading floor. Shelia met her at the elevator as usual and held up a cup of coffee and a cheese Danish. How Briar was able to keep such a trim waist was beyond her but it was her favorite way to start the day and she was there to make sure Briar was taken care of.

"Mighty generous of you, Shelia. Makes me wonder if you're not stepping out with my girl when I'm at work."

"Yes I have so much time on my hands and your money at my disposal to make Claire realize I'm alive much less happy."

Briar stopped walking and just stared at her as if Shelia had just spoken some deep truth no one



had ever been brave enough to voice. "Do you really think she's only with me because of the money?"

"I can't answer that for you, boss." Placing her hand over Briar's chest she continued, "For decisions that important, that have to do with your life, you have to look deep in here. I know you don't like to have those types of sensitive chats but sometimes they're necessary."

The change happened so fast it was hard for Briar to realize what was happening. From the time she'd gotten up that morning she'd had a nagging case of heartburn and pain in her arm and neck, but she had blamed it on the late night meal. When Shelia placed her hand over her heart it was like she had started a radiating pain that was making it hard for her to breath.

"Briar?" Shelia took the cup of coffee out of her hand and put it on the nearest desk. "Briar, are you alright?"

"I can't..." The pain cut off anything else she was going to say and for one brief second she was overcome with a choking fear when her vision started to dim. "Shelia," she pinned her with those blue eyes that always reminded Shelia of the first blue of dawn, "please."

As frantic as the office usually was, it kicked into overdrive when Briar slumped against Shelia and ended up on the floor. While Shelia started to assess what the problem was, the guy behind her was on the phone to 911. The lasting image they all had was of Briar's shirt open and the EMS workers running enough current through her body to lift her off the stretcher.

"Clear," said the emergency worker when the first shot didn't work and they still had no pulse. The others stepped away but had equipment in their hands ready to continue their jobs knowing time was precious now. "Move, and call ahead and have the cardiac unit waiting for us."

Shelia ran after them to the elevator, tears making it hard for her to see, but she couldn't leave Briar alone to face this. Seeing her appearing so weak and vulnerable seemed so surreal. It was a run to the ambulance as they continued to pump in medication and strap on more monitors that showed a very weak pulse.

"Briar, don't you dare give up," said Shelia as she got into the back with her. On the way to the hospital she tried to call Claire to have her meet them at the hospital but her phone was off and she wasn't answering at the penthouse.

Hours later Shelia stood when a doctor came through the doors and waved her back to her seat. He sat next to her and exhaled like he was exhausted. "The nurse said you came in with Ms. Kilston."

"Is she alright now?"

He put his hand on her knee and tried to think of the most compassionate way of telling her Briar's prognosis. "She's being monitored, but Ms. Kilston's diagnosis is serious. This morning she suffered a significant heart attack that has left her heart muscle severely damaged."

"But with time or maybe an operation she'll be fine right?"

"I'm sorry, but the damage is irreversible. She seemed healthy but this episode came on because of severe blockages."

Shelia shook her head and tried not to cry but couldn't help the tears that started to fall. "What do you mean irreversible? Is she going to die?"

"We're helping her breathe and we're monitoring her heart, but we need to pray for a miracle now. A transplant is her only hope for recovery and with AB negative blood, it's going to take a miracle."

"Can I see her?"

He took her hand and walked her into the room in Cardiac ICU unit, and didn't let go when Shelia saw Briar for the first time. The vital and animated woman she knew was now lying there fighting for her life. Her fingers felt cold to Shelia as she held her hand, the doctor going back to the desk to give her some privacy.

"I should've asked you to start ordering a salad long before last night. Oh, Briar, you can't do this to me. Please promise me you're going to hang on and not give up."

There was no answer but Shelia sat there with her until the staff asked her to leave. On the way back to the office she called Claire again hoping to find her. She didn't want to just leave a message as to what had happened. If Briar were awake, the fact Claire was missing would have been the answer to the question she'd asked before her heart gave out.

## **New Orleans**

"Morning, babe," said Vivian when she heard Megan behind her.

She had gotten up before the sun had risen and made coffee to take to the upper deck and watch the first colors of the day paint the sky. The rain from the day before had stopped only an hour before but had left a multitude of clouds and a heaviness to the air.

"Morning." She'd taken Mac for his morning walk and was feeling as sluggish as the weather. As she always did, Megan had tried to put aside the feelings that had occupied her mind the day before.

Putting her cup down Vivian walked over and kissed her and held her close for a long time. "You feeling okay?"

"I'm fine, just a little tired. You ready to go?" Because of their job, Vivian and Alan were on the road before six every morning.

"We don't have to go until a little later today so I thought I'd make you breakfast before you have

to get to school." The offer garnered Vivian another kiss.

Her first job out of high school had been as a cook offshore and Vivian had discovered something about herself she would've never guessed existed. She found the domesticity of preparing a good meal very relaxing and enjoyed showing off her skills for Megan.

After enjoying vegetable omelets together, Vivian went out and unlocked her bike. Before she got on, she turned back and lifted her hand to wave. "Do me a favor," she called up to Megan.

"Sure. You want a ride?"

"Nah, I just want you to remember something for me."

"What's that?"

She smiled and lowered her hand. "Just remember that I love you." It was as romantic a notion as Vivian ever displayed and it made Megan's face break out into a beautiful smile.

"That'll be easy to remember, honey. Be careful and I'll see you tonight."

When her principal came to the door of her classroom and asked to speak to her, it seemed like the words she told Vivian had just left her lips. Her boss started talking and it was all she could do to not tell her to shut up.

"They brought her to the emergency room at Big Charity." The principal held on to Megan and just kept telling her what she needed to know, no matter how painful it was. "Your brother just called so we have to go, honey."

"That can't be right," said Megan not even realizing she was being led out to the parking lot and into her friend's car. "She was fine this morning when she left for work."

She kept repeating that line as they drove up to the emergency entrance of the mammoth medical complex. Alan ran up to her and took over caring for Megan, putting his arms around his sister. They stepped into a small waiting room where a doctor was sitting patiently waiting for them. This was the part of the job there was no adequate class for. In his opinion, there had been no easy way devised to break such life altering news.

He took Megan's hand and turned his eyes to Alan trying to convey that he shouldn't let go of her. "I have a few things to discuss with you, Ms. Beniot, and your brother tells me you have Ms. Loreio's medical power of attorney."

"I have the paperwork at home if you need it, but I really need to see her. I'm sure this meeting is important but I just need to see Viv."

"No, ma'am, I trust we'll get to the paperwork eventually, if it's necessary. I just want to discuss what happened with you and tell you what to expect before we go in." He took a deep breath like

he was about to jump into the deep end of a very cold pool and just started. "This morning because of the slick roads it's my understanding a driver skidded out of control and hit Ms. Loreio while she was on her bicycle."

"But she is always so careful," said Megan, as she gripped onto his hand like a lifeline.

"It wasn't her fault, sis. The guy just went through a stop sign and tried to avoid her but the wet road made him lose control," provided Alan.

"What we have to face now," the doctor paused and took another deep breath, and tried to smile as a way of comforting her. "What we have to face now is that Ms. Loreio has no brain activity so you have to make some decisions for her now that she can't make for herself."

"I know Vivian, and she can pull out of this. She's a hard worker and in great shape. She can beat this if we give her the time."

"Megan, the doc got about four opinions already while we were waiting for you to get here. It's the machines that are keeping her alive. I know Viv almost as well as you do. She wouldn't want this kind of existence. We had that talk once and I know for sure she wouldn't want that." Alan pulled her close to his chest and let the tears come. There were more than a few that fell down his own face for the friend he'd lost in one senseless accident.

"I can't do that to her, Al. I don't have the right to take her life away."

"Then let her words and her wishes do it for her," said the doctor. "Did she have a living will?"

"It's with all her papers. We drew them up a couple of years ago when we met with an attorney."

"Then your brother is right, Ms. Beniot. Let Vivian have what she wanted and ease your heart in that it's her wishes we'll be carrying out."

Megan moved away from Alan a little bit and grabbed on to the doctor's hand again before he could stand and move away. "Are you sure there isn't anything we can do?"

"My oath is always to preserve life were I can, ma'am. Especially when I see what the person has to lose if we don't do everything we can to make them whole again. The people they love and will be leaving behind if I don't do my job to the best of my ability is always a major factor in everything I do. I swear to you on all that I believe that Vivian is beyond my reach and for that I'm sorry."

"Thank you then. I just needed to ask."

He stopped at the door and looked back at them. "I realize this may sound harsh, but was it also her intent to be an organ donor."

"That's something I really don't know," said Megan.

"I wouldn't want to push you but with her rare blood type she could make such a difference to so many people if that was her wish. Look at it as a way of letting Vivian's spirit live on and changing someone's life for the better."

Megan sat with Vivian alone for over an hour, whispering things she'd wished she said that morning before she had ridden off. She kissed her goodbye with a little guilt for the thoughts she'd had the night before when she'd opened the box to find a knot inside. Their relationship might not have been perfect, but not having Vivian there at the end of her days and in the mornings was going to be incredibly lonely.

She rested her head on Vivian's chest and listened to the beating heart inside one last time. It was something she took for granted every night as they went to sleep and Vivian held her. The sound was reassuring and just one of the things she would be losing as soon as they rolled Vivian into surgery.

"I want you to promise me that you'll move on knowing that you are the best thing in my life. I love you, Vivian, and I want to thank you for sharing your life with me. You gave your best always and I'm going to miss you more than I'll ever be ever to say. Take care, love, and you'll be in my heart."

She kissed her one more time and nodded to the medical personal outside. They came in and started to move Vivian as well as all the equipment, and she started crying when Alan stopped them for a moment and kissed Vivian's forehead and whispered his own goodbye in her ear.

"It's going to be all right, Megan. I promise it will be," said Alan.

"Thank you again for doing this," said the doctor as he joined them. "I hope that your kindness will be rewarded."

### **New York - Later That Night**

"Will she ever be back to normal?" asked Claire. She had finally resurfaced hours later at the penthouse she shared with Briar.

"We need to concentrate on keeping her stable before we start talking about long term prognosis, ma'am." Dr. David Rider finished writing something in Briar's chart trying to keep his voice calm since this woman was doing everything to get a rise out of him.

"I need a better answer than that," said Claire from the chair furthest from the bed. "As prepared as Briar is for everything we haven't had the opportunity for her to make provisions for me, so you have to tell me when she'll be up and around. Shelia, you tell him. Who's going to take care of me?"

"What's the chances of finding a suitable donor?" asked Shelia, ignoring Claire's outburst. It had been a long day but she'd refused to leave Briar's side.

"Right now what Briar has going for her is that on the current list, she's the only one waiting for an organ with her particular blood type. Our problem is the fact she had this particular blood type."

"And with a new heart, she'll be back to normal?" asked Claire again.

"It's her only chance at a normal life, ma'am, but right now all we can do is make her as comfortable as possible."

Before he could go on, Briar opened her eyes and looked directly at Shelia. "What'd you put in that coffee this morning?" she joked weakly.

"Honey, thank God," said Claire. She jumped out of her chair and ran to Briar's side as soon as she heard the raspy voice.

She looked shocked when Shelia grabbed her by the collar and pulled her back. "Give her some room to breath."

"Listen, Shelia, I realize you're upset but don't touch me again," said Claire.

"Claire," Briar turned her head and tried to find the strength to finish. "I want you to wait outside."

"But I want to take care of you."

"I need to tell Shelia a few things about work then you can come back in." Her lips never moved as Claire bent and kissed her before stepping out of the room. "Shelia, you know what to do about that."

"I'll take care of it don't worry. I'm just sorry it had to turn out like this," she said meaning Claire and her self-interest. "Don't worry about anything when it comes to Claire and work, I'll take care of everything."

"Keep it up and I'll give you the company," said Briar as her eyes closed. She had fought her way out of the darkness but after only the short talk she had no choice but to give into it again.

The shrill beep of David's phone made Briar open her eyes again. Her slow pulse picked up some when she saw the excitement on his face. "What's your ETA?" he asked the person he was talking to. "We'll be ready so radio dispatch to the operating room so we can be ready for when you arrive."

"What's going on?" asked Shelia.

"Your boss must have a lot of friends in heaven, ma'am." He moved to the door and signaled the nurse to come in. "Get the paperwork ready and we'll prep when you're done."

"Please, doctor," said Briar wanting to know what was going on herself.

"There's an organ in route and it's the right blood type. We'll have to do some further tests but it's a start. I just need your consent to operate if this works out."

"Give me the papers, doc. Life's full of gambles and I love nothing but to continue to sit at the table," said Briar as her eyes closed again. Despite what was happening she felt deceptively calm.

Early the next morning Shelia gave Dr. Rider the biggest hug he'd ever received in the family waiting room when he gave her the good news. It would take months of recovery and a lifetime of medications but Briar was on the way to a second chance.

The heart had been a perfect match and was in perfect condition. For David it was always a thrill to take a heart from an ice chest rushed into the room and watch it come to life in his patient's chest like it just belonged there.

"Take care of this one, Briar," he'd said as he closed her chest after surgery. "Someone gave you the ultimate gift so honor that by taking good care of yourself and those you love."

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"Are you sure you aren't pushing it? It's only been two months."

Briar had a smart reply ready to fly then reminded herself Shelia was just worried about her. "It's been two months, sweetheart, and you've been to every doctor's appointment with me. Did he sneak off and tell you something he didn't tell me about my recovery?"

"It's just that I know you better than David Rider does. Given a chance you'll go back to smoking cigars, eating steaks, long days and aggravating women in no time." She pushed the container of applesauce closer since Briar had finished her low fat turkey sandwich.

"What if I promise to stick to a schedule you keep for me?" Briar put a pout on her face and tried to act pathetic. "I'll go mad if I have to spend another day holed up in here."

The apartment Briar had lived in for five years had a spectacular view of the park from the outside balcony where they were sitting. Inside the decorations were understated and comfortable, mostly reflecting her personality. Her study was lined with books that had actually been read and weren't for show. It was in that room that they spent a majority of their time when Shelia came over and gave her a run down of what was happening at the firm.

"Yes I can see where the average person would call the police the conditions are so deplorable."

The jibe made her laugh and she stood slowly to go inside to the study before Shelia had to return to work. Along with the rows of books the room had a large window under which sat a chess game. The pieces were still in play from the last match of wits she'd been locked in with

her father. When he'd passed away, she'd just left the pieces where they sat.

Shelia looked at it as Briar took a seat behind her desk ready to study some papers she'd brought over. As well as she thought she knew Briar, coming up to the inner sanctum every day had brought her new insight. Briar's world in the office was filled with uncertainty and risks, but here there was order. From the closets to the kitchen that was used only by the staff because she didn't cook, it was all neat to the point of compulsion.

She turned back to the enigma that was her boss and noticed again the differences in her appearance. She' lost weight, and her skin had lost that tanned appearance, but she seemed more relaxed. "Are you sure you can't give it another month?"

"The doctor said it was fine and I believe him. Trust me on this one, Shelia. I need to get back and test this baby out," she said as she tapped her fingers over her chest.

"That's not funny."

"I'm sorry, but I promise to make the most of this second chance. I'm going to do that by going back to what I know best and enjoy it."

She walked Shelia to the door after calling for the driver. There was one more thing to do before she could put the trauma of what had happened on the shelf like one of the books in the office. The organ donation program had asked her to write a letter to the widow her donor had left behind. The fact they'd been married was the only personal information she had about the person who had lost their life to make hers possible.

She sat at the antique library desk, pulled out a few sheets of her best stationery and her favorite pen only to just stare at the blank sheet. An hour went by before she started and when she was done two pages were filled with her distinctive scrawl minus her signature. She sealed it then put that envelope in the one the organization had provided.

Not wanting to wait, she walked down the street until she found a mailbox to send it off. The letter was as poignant as she could ever remember being, but the magnitude of what had happened to her had a way of making her feel as if her life had become somewhat surreal.

When Briar returned home the place was quiet. The maid had gone home for the night and Shelia had kept her promise to not come back after work to check on her again. She locked the door and headed for the bathroom wanting a shower before having to face the bland small piece of chicken with a side of broccoli that was going to be dinner.

She stripped from the waist up and was about to take off her pants when something jumped out at her. The long wicked scar that now dominated the landscape of her chest had healed. With time the doctor had promised it wouldn't be so red and wide, but that hadn't happened yet and sometimes it caught her by surprise.

Her fingers were tentative as she followed her fingers in the mirror. Slowly Briar started at the



top and worked her way down, the whole time awed by the truth that someone else's heart was beating in her chest.

"I didn't ask for this you know." She put her hand over her heart and felt silly for having spoken out loud but felt compelled to finish.

"My father had the same weak heart. He just wasn't as lucky. I'm not sure what you used to do, but tomorrow you're going to become a stockbroker." She laughed and flattened her hand more as if trying to feel the steady beat.

"They told me you were young, healthy and married. I'm sorry it took your passing to give my sorry ass a second chance. Please don't take it out on me by quitting anytime soon, and I promise to follow where you lead me."

### **New Orleans**

"I promise I'm all right, Al." Megan was busy packing empty boxes into her car. School was fixing to end and she was staring to put away all the supplies they weren't using anymore.

"I don't understand why you don't move in with me and Bridget."

"Viv dying on me has made me sad, Mr. Worrywart, it didn't incapacitate me."

"You never leave the boathouse except to go to work for starters. How many times have we invited you over for dinner?" He took the boxes from her and carried them around to the trunk when the backseat was full. "Being holed up in there isn't healthy."

She moved closer and hugged him. "I know you worry because you love me, but I'm not ready. The way I'm going about it might not be your way, but it's the best I know how. I promise I just need time to come to terms with the fact that she's gone." She stopped there not ready to voice that she needed time to forgive herself for the feelings of wanting more than she'd had. Losing Vivian had been her punishment for those feelings and it was eating away at her.

"Sis, you can have all the time you need, but I don't want you to cut us out. We're your family and we love you. Mom keeps asking about you and I don't know what to tell her to keep putting her off."

She smiled and started for the driver's side having had enough of the emotional conversation. "When I'm ready, you'll be the first one I call. Until then you need to stop worrying so much. Tell mom the same thing." Before she opened the door she paused and turned to the grassy area at the beginning of the dock. "Because we both know how she felt about Vivian when she was alive. Having her worry about her now that she's gone seems tacky in a way."

"Just remember that I'm here for you." He moved closer and put his hands on her shoulders. "I miss her too you know."

"You spent more time with her than I did. I haven't forgotten that."

"Take care and I'll stop by in a couple of days."

The rumble of Alan's truck started and faded just as quickly as he made his way to work. She didn't turn around not being able to turn her eyes away from the grass lot that was just on the other side of the levee.

*"We're going to be late," said Vivian as she looked at her watch. A college acquaintance of Megan's was getting married and she wasn't really looking forward to it. Why they had even gotten an invitation was still a mystery but not wanting to be rude Megan had accepted.*

*"Tell me again why I agreed to this."*

*"For the free liquor and fascinating conversation there's going to be at the reception," teased Vivian. She held out her hand to Megan to help her off the boat admiring how good she looked in the dress she'd picked out. "You look beautiful, baby."*

*"Thanks."*

*They didn't let go of each other's hand as they made their way to the car so Megan was surprised when Vivian pulled her in the opposite direction of where she'd parked the car. The sun was starting to set and the breeze from the lake was starting to pick up. They stopped just at the slope of the levee and Vivian kicked her shoes off and bent to take off her socks. She looked so content with the grass under her feet Megan ended up doing the same thing.*

*She laughed when Vivian took off her jacket and spread it on the grass so she wouldn't get her dress dirty when they laid down to watch the colors fade into the violet color the sky in New Orleans was known for.*

*"It's amazing to me that for all the things that have changed over the years, the stars stay constant," said Vivian pointing to the emerging night sky. "There might be more of them now, but sailors who sailed to distant lands to make all sorts of discoveries depended on them to show the way."*

*"You sound like such a romantic." She turned and looked at Vivian's profile. "Maybe you were born too late."*

*"I get to share my life with you so I think I was born just right."*

They had gone on to talk about whatever popped into their heads as they used the levee as a backdrop to look at the sky and listen to the lazy waves lap against the rocks on shore. Megan had learned a lot about Vivian that night. She had been a sailor at heart but loved the feel of thick grass beneath her feet. The wedding had been forgotten but that night would stay with her forever.

"I hope you found some stars to show the way to the next life, Viv. If you did I hope you left me a trail to follow when it's my time. I miss you."

### **New York**

"I want you to just sit and let everyone do their job today. The firm has done without you all this time and we didn't implode so just relax and ease back into the hustle." Shelia was sitting next to Briar on the way into work acting like she'd burst from the build up if someone pricked her with a pin.

"Speaking as someone who had a heart condition, I want you to calm down and take deep cleansing breaths." She put her hand over Shelia's knee and turned from looking out the window. "I promised you I'd be good if you didn't give me a hard time about coming back. Time to hold up your end of the bargain, sugar plum."

Next to them a truck pulled up and stopped waiting for the light to turn green. On the side panel was a sailboat cutting through rough waters if the full sails were any indication. A feeling of happiness came over Briar so strongly that she put her hand up to the window.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said to please not call me sugar plum where anyone would hear you," said Shelia. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." The truck pulled away and just as quickly as it made its way down the street was as fast as the feeling left her. "Just saw something."

For the rest of the trip Shelia talked about certain deals they had going and who was accumulating commissions not noticing her boss sitting quietly rubbing the scar on her chest. The motion had become so second nature that Briar didn't realize she was doing it.

The trip into the office took some time as everyone came up to tell her how good she looked, and how glad they were to have her back. Her office looked as if no one had touched the papers she'd left for further review and the desk chair was facing the window. There was something new on the credenza on the side of her desk and along with the bow a card sat waiting for her return.

"I know you hate stuff like this but I saw it at Sharper Image and I thought it would come in handy on the tough days," said Shelia before Briar threw it in the trashcan.

"Then it should come in handy everyday," Briar answered with a teasing tone. "I guess I should ask what it is before I thank you."

"It's one of those sound machines that help you relax to the sounds of the forest or the ocean. I know it's silly but I really missed you and I want you around for years to come."

In an uncharacteristic moment, Briar pulled her close and hugged her. "If I haven't said it enough, thanks for everything, Shelia. I wouldn't have gotten better this fast without you taking

care of me."

"Anytime, and before I give you this next message would you like to turn on my gift?"

"It can't be that bad." She took a seat and turned her new toy on to the sounds of the forest.

"Your mother called and wants to come and see you."

"I'll give you the company if you call her back and tell her I died in surgery."

Shelia came close to shooting coffee out of her nose from laughing so hard, which she tried to cover up by giving Briar a scolding glare. "She's your mother and you can't put her off forever."

"All right I'll call her. Maybe the planets are in their proper alignment and I'll get off with only a warning for not heeding her advice years ago."

"What was her advice?"

The pen on her desk was twirled without effort through her fingers and Shelia could see the small idiosyncrasies returning as Briar adjusted to being back. "To join a commune and learn to talk to nature."

"That doesn't sound horrible."

The pen came back the other way just as quickly. "Once I had that down pat, then I was supposed to make love under a full moon to learn the true meaning of life."

"Your mother sounds like an interesting person." The picture of Carlson Kilston hanging in the lobby didn't quite fit with the person Briar was describing. "After working with your father for only a short time..."

"It's hard to believe he made love in the house much less outside. Uh huh, I always thought the same thing. My mother in my opinion is best described as a force of nature. She's sort of like a hurricane."

Shelia laughed in agreement of the description. She'd only met Henley Kilston a few times but she left a definite impression. "What does that make your father?"

Leaning back in her chair Briar took time to remember the man she tried so hard to please. Not that it had been hard, but she tried always to excel at everything she'd gotten involved with. Her life had centered around trying to build on what her father had started. She'd surpassed even his high expectations.

"It made him a thatch hut on the beach of life when it came to her," she finally said.

"That doesn't paint your mother in the best of light."

Briar shook her head. "I didn't mean it that way. Thatch huts just don't hold up well against forces of nature, and when they met it was the way he described it. She was a force of nature that turned him inside out and gave him a sense of being blown over. My mother, as different as she is from him, made him extremely happy."

The sound moved from the forest to a gentle rain as Briar fooled around with her new toy. "Maybe that's what you should hold out for then, your own force of nature."

"And I should get back to work."

For the next few hours she methodically went through the reports on her desk, returned some calls and had a brief meeting with her managers. She was enjoying the glass of orange juice Shelia had insisted she drink now that coffee was off her list of choices, when she flipped her gift to the sound of the ocean.

It was strange to feel her heart race for no other reason than the sound of waves, and then an overwhelming urge to be outside took over. Without Shelia or anyone else noticing Briar left the office and got into the first cab she found.

"Central Park."

The driver looked at her though the rear view mirror with a bored expression. "It's a big place, so pick on entrance."

"First one you find that has sun and grass."

He pulled close to the entrance near the Plaza Hotel and accepted his fare not interested enough to ask if this was a good place. Briar got out and walked the path a bit till she came to an open area ringed by trees. She felt like aliens had taken over when she found herself taking her shoes and socks off so she could feel the grass under her feet.

It was cool and comforting making her heart beat slow to a steadier rate. The biggest surprise was that she felt an overwhelming sense of happiness come over her that far eclipsed the foolishness of standing there in a business suit in bare feet.

"When you were a kid you would've demanded I bathe you if your feet touched the ground." Her mother's voice startled her but Briar didn't move from her spot. Henley kicked her sandals off and joined her, and with her jeans and Indian style top appeared like she did this often.

"Hello, mom." Briar put her arm around her shoulder and gave Henley a hug. "How'd you know where to find me?"

"I was on my way up to see you when you shot passed me like your feet were on fire." She glanced down at the mentioned body part. "And it seems like I was right. Do you come here often?"

"Actually except for the occasional dinner down the way," she said pointing the direction of Tavern on the Green, "it's the first time I've been in the park."

"Why today?" Henley pulled back a lock of brown hair infused with a little gray wanting to see her daughter's face. A little of the normal healthy glow was coming back but Briar still looked a bit haggard.

Had anyone else asked Briar most probably would've made some thing up, but with her mother she knew better. "I was sitting at my desk listening to some sound machine Shelia gave me when the sound of waves made me want to take my shoes off."

"That's interesting don't you think?" Henley tried to sound neutral now trying to lead Briar to feeling one way or the other.

"Considering this was the first time I've ever had to rush out of the office to do something like this I'd have to say it's very interesting." With her hands in her pockets Briar rocked back and forth enjoying the sun on her face.

"Are you finding anything else interesting these days, sweetheart?"

"There are only so many admissions I'm willing to make in a day, mom."

Henley had to laugh at the answer it reminded her so much of her late husband. Carlson could be bent out of his normal routine to a point but he'd never fully snap. When she'd had Briar it was like the kid had completely skipped over the buffet of her gene pool in favor of Carlson's. If it couldn't be proven to them with charts, graphs and tons of sound research they took nothing on faith.

"That's true, so I'll let you off the hook for now." She bent to put Briar's socks in her shoes feeling the need to do something for her even if it was small. "Feel like taking your mother to tea?"

After putting their shoes back on the two walked across to the Plaza holding hands. For Henley the contact was special since Briar usually wasn't much into things like that either.

The jeans and sandals were forgiven with the size of Briar's tip and they were escorted to a table. Once they'd ordered Henley turned to her and reached for her hand again.

"I know you'll probably get mad, but why didn't you have Shelia call me when all this happened?" She'd been at the apartment plenty after the surgery, but had missed all of Briar's hospital stay.

"She tried, regardless of whether it was what I would've wanted or not, and I asked her not to since I didn't want to worry you. You were in New Mexico doing some volunteer work I think is what she told me. I was all right by then so I told her to let you finish. Your work's important to

you and I understand that."

"Nothing in this world has ever been more important to me than you and your father. The thought of something happening to you too just about drove me mad when I talked to her."

She put her hand over her mother's and smiled. "You don't have to tell me that, mom. This, just like what happened to dad, was just something beyond everyone's control, especially mine, but it turned out for the best."

Henley sat back when the waiter put down a tiered tray of finger foods along with their tea. "Did I ever tell you your father and I had our first date here?"

Selfishly Briar shook her head wanting to hear the story again. She never foresaw a day when she'd answer yes to that question not wanting to hear her mother tell it. The telling had always given her hope that the story would be one more thing she could emulate her father in. His biggest success to her was the love he'd found with her mother. They had been so different, but Henley had give Carlson's life meaning.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," said Briar when her mother finished. "I'll have to play hooky from the office more often I had such a great day."

"Careful, honey, you might trigger a run on the market with talk like that." They walked down Fifth Avenue admiring the window displays. "You think you can handle one more bit of advice?"

"Does it have to do with dancing naked under the full moon or something?" The question got her a swat on the arm.

"After what you've been through, I did a lot of reading," started Henley. She was enjoying the feel of Briar's hand in hers and the calm look on the handsome face. Usually by her third word Briar was usually rolling her eyes.

"What about?"

"Patients of transplants are finding that at times their new parts come with an added bonus."

"A 90,000 mile warranty?"

Henley slapped her arm again. "I'm being serious."

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself," said Briar. "What did you find?"

"The research in some people found that the organ had somehow retained memories from their original owner."

Briar stopped walking at the answer. "How's that possible?"

"The doctor's can't answer that question, and I'm fairly sure you know my answer on the subject." She smiled at the way Briar nodded indulgently at her. Most of her late husband's friends had thought her zany at best, but Henley's more whimsical side had always been charming to him. "There are things in life you're just going to have to take on faith, my darling. Could you do me one tiny favor though?"

"Sure, I've made a few promises over the last few months, what's one more." Briar answered.

"There has never been a more important time in your life than now to start listening to your heart."

"I promise I'll try, unless it starts telling me that capitalism is bad and I should live in a box in the woods. Then it's on its own."

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"We're going to Disney World this summer, Miss Megan." The little boy next to her desk was holding a book with a picture of Mickey Mouse on its cover.

"That's wonderful, Jamarcus. After your great year in school I hope you have a wonderful time." The bell hadn't rung yet so she was trying to finish her lesson plan for the week while her teaching assistant stood outside waiting for everyone to arrive. "Are you excited about it?"

"I can't wait to meet Mickey and Donald Duck. They're my favorites." He held his book higher hoping to take her attention from the papers on her desk. "They make me happy and they're both in here."

Putting her pen down she turned and bent down so they were at face level. Her hair was pulled in a ponytail and she was casually dressed in a pair of khaki pants, a look that helped put the kids at ease with her. "Would you like me to read this to you before everyone gets in here?"

Jamarcus shook his head and pressed the book into her hands. "I brought it from home 'cause I wanted to give it to you." He watched her face as she took it again hoping his plan would work.

"If it's got your favorite characters in it, then why would you want to give it away?"

"I wanted you to be happy too, Miss Megan. You don't smile as much as you used to and I thought my book would help."

The small hopeful face turned up at her so earnestly culminated for Megan all the things she loved about teaching. "I'm sorry I've been sad, buddy, and thank you for the book. We'll read it to the class together and I'm sure it'll be great."

He ran off as soon as she finished, the size of his smile making her smile in return. She put the book down and forgot about her paperwork, choosing instead to pull out a picture of Vivian she'd found in her desk.



The day she'd taken it Vivian was getting ready to go on a solo sail. She looked thrilled with the prospect of taking the cat out on the lake alone. Her smile was huge as she mugged for Megan so she could finish the roll of film in the camera. It had turned out to be one of her favorite pictures of her late lover.

"I sure do miss you, Viv, and I'm not sure how to make that go away." She ran her fingers over the glass as if trying to elicit an answer. "Al wants me to move so he and mom can keep an eye on me, but I'm not ready for that."

A bell ringing could be heard throughout the building followed by the sound of little running feet. "I want to spend the summer on the boat reading and looking out at the water. Maybe I'll figure out what you found so fascinating about it. And if you're not too busy, why don't you send me a sign that you're all right. I don't think I can move forward without one."

With a cheeriness she didn't feel she greeted her class and took the time to read Jamarcus' book while he held it. At the end of the day she drove home to Mac and took him for a walk along the levee. The loyal little dog sat next to her with his head in her lap even after she unleashed him.

"You know something, boy?" He barked obediently. "It's just us now. After this summer if I don't have it all worked out would you like to go on a trip with me?" He barked again when she paused. "I'll remember you said that when you start to complain about my driving."

Mac never squirmed or whimpered when she help him close and cried. He only wagged his tail and tired his best to protect her by licking her face as the tears dropped from her eyes.

"God, Viv, why'd you have to go and die on me?"

The gentle waves of the lake didn't answer and neither did the stars that were out before she made it home. Before she went in for the night she went up on the deck and just stared at the full moon.

There was a ring of light around it and it brought to mind an old fish tale Vivian used to love to tell her whenever they saw the phenomenon. "*It means something good is coming.*" Vivian had said it over and over again, but now it seemed just that - a fish tale.

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Briar stood outside with a glass of juice in her hand willing her brain to pretend there was vodka in it. From the balcony she could still hear the traffic somewhat but the moon was taking up so much of her concentration she barely registered anything else.

"Do you need anything else, Briar?"

She turned to the maid with a start and shook her head. "Thanks for dinner, Rose. You can go if you like. Sorry to keep you so late."

"Don't worry about me and just worry about you, sweetie. See you in the morning."

An hour had passed before she realized she'd been standing outside moon gazing and absently rubbing the scar on her chest. She thought about what her mom had said about listening to her heart, so she closed her eyes and waited. When no great truths were revealed she laughed at herself for being such an idiot and went to bed.

The next morning she pulled a crisp blue shirt out of the closet and slipped it on. As always she started buttoning from the bottom up but something happened after the second button. She raised her head to the mirror and to the scar it showed. The sight brought with it an answer to the question from the previous night.

It was an absurd answer so she chose to ignore it and finished dressing. Rose was waiting with oatmeal, a glass of low fat milk and the Wall Street Journal. She picked up her briefcase and headed down to the car anxious to get to work. Two blocks later the answer wouldn't be ignored.

"Jeff, could you take me to a car dealership please." She picked up the car phone to clear a few things. "Better yet make it a Jeep kind of place."

"Whatever you want, Ms. Kilston."

"Shelia, do me a favor and clear the next couple of days for me." She waited for the inevitable lecture and questions. "I'm fine, really. I'm just doing what my mother asked me to do. After that I'll be back I promise."

The car stopped in front of a dealership and even though it was early, an eager salesman approached and held his hand out. An hour later she threw her briefcase in the back of the new white Cherokee and turned left into traffic.

Briar turned her phone off and just relaxed into the leather seat and started driving. Before she knew it, the city was behind her and the road opened up to hills covered with trees and different types of farm animals.

When the sun started to set she pulled off at the next exit and pulled into the first hotel she came to. It was then she realized that if you were going to lose your mind and follow your heart, packing would have been a wise course of action.

Another short drive gave Briar her first taste of something she'd only seen on television - Wal Mart. For someone who rarely stepped foot in any type of retail establishment, it was a learning experience starting with the greeter at the door. Everyone was so friendly she bought stock in the company when she got back to her room with her new pajamas and toothbrush.

The rest of the trip was just as adventuresome, building her stock portfolio as she went along. Two days later the cool, crisp air of New York was replaced by the humidity of Louisiana, but the further south she drove, the happier she got.

Instinctively she got off an exit of I-10 in New Orleans pulling into a middle class neighborhood. She blended in with some of her other purchases along the way, people just looking at the tall stranger because she was attractive not because she appeared lost.

She walked a few blocks before the now familiar rush of her heart stopped her. To her right would take her further into the neighborhood, to the left was a strip of retail outlets but neither seemed right. The only logical option was to go straight forward up the grassy incline of the levee.

The expanse of water made her want to strip her shoes off and wade in when she reached the top and got her first look at Lake Ponchartrain. Though she'd never laid eyes on it except from the air when she'd flown to the city on business a few years before, it felt like coming home.

"You all right there, stretch?" The old man who'd asked the question didn't get too close not wanting to frighten her. "You look like you've been pole axed."

"Just admiring the view and stretching my legs."

"Want to join me for some coffee."

Briar didn't move either but did turn and study his face for longer than seemed polite. "Why?"

"Just as easy to pour some extra water in the pot, and I figure you'd like the view better up close than from here. If that's not a good enough answer, then I'll go with southern hospitality."

The crack made her laugh and throw caution to the stiff breeze blowing and take him up on his offer. "How about I stick to water but I'll keep you company while you brew?"

She took his arm to steady him down the incline when he stumbled as she headed for the dock she failed to notice. "Thank you. I keep forgetting I'm not twenty anymore."

"My father used to say a little dizziness and a little pain beat the hell out of the alternative."

His new friend was dressed casually but Reuben Stickle noticed how soft her hand was as she continued to help him down the levee. Not a laborer like the clothes indicated, and not from the area from her speech pattern. This one had a story to tell and he was fixed on getting it out of her.

"Used to say? Did he find a cure for both?"

"He did but I wouldn't recommend it." Briar let go of him when the ground leveled out now fascinated by the small floating community."

"What, you're not going to give me a chance to try it?"

"It was the alternative." His gray brows came together to show he was confused so she elaborated. "He died."

"I really do owe you something to drink for being so stupid."

She waved off his comment and went back to studying the houseboats. Most of them were two stories, had no motors and had a good-sized deck either at the top or on the bow. They were floating but none of them appeared to be ready to set sail.

Reuben led her to his place and pointed to a set of chairs on his own sundeck. "You sure you don't want a cup of coffee?"

"Just water thanks."

As if knowing what was on her mind, he told her the story of their little community by the lake. It had started as a fishing community but the crabbers and fisherman moved on when their catches got smaller as the city's population grew. They relocated further south leaving their homes to the little group who just wanted some peace.

He went on to tell her about his years of teaching and of losing his wife Joan too soon after he'd retired. Three hours and a few glasses of water late he finally realized he still didn't know anything about his guest including her name.

"I hope I haven't bored you too much. My wife was always telling me I could go on until the other person just said uncle. So were you bored..." He trailed off the question wanting to see if she supplied her name.

"Briar," she held her hand out to shake his.

"Nice to meet you, Briar. I'm Reuben Stickle, and I owe you another glass of water for not introducing myself earlier." Since her hand was still in his Reuben noticed again how soft and perfectly manicured Briar's hand was.

"Thanks for the great afternoon, and I'll pass on anymore water. I just arrived tonight and I need to find a place to stay before it gets any later." A bark coming from close by stopped her explanation, turning instead to see what was agitating the dog.

"That's just Mac. He likes to make a fuss every so often but he's about as tall as flea on stilts so don't let him worry you." Reuben let out a loud whistle, which instead of calming Mac down made him leap from the deck to the dock and take off. "She's going to kill me if anything happens to that mutt."

Not bothering to ask who, Briar did some leaping of her own and took off. Half way up the incline she tripped. Mac came running and running and came to put his front paws on her head as if to finish off his conquest.

When woman and dog heard clapping, Mac didn't move but started barking again. "I always wondered what he did while I was at work. Who knew Mac was pursuing a career in pro wrestling."

The amused sounding voice made Briar reach up for Mac and turn around. When she sat up and faced her teaser she had to put her hand over her chest in an attempt to slow her heart down at the sight of her.

"He didn't hurt you did he?" Megan took a step forward not liking how pale the woman suddenly appeared.

"Sorry," a deep breath got things under control. "Your pup just wounded my pride is all."

"Briar, you all right?" Reuben asked having just made the trek.

"Seems like I'm not twenty anymore either," she joked as she stood, then handed the dog over. "I believe this little one belongs to you."

"Are you sure you're all right?" asked Megan again.

"I'm fine really, but I do have to get going." She shook Reuben's hand again and started back to her car. Not quite the top she stopped when he called her name again.

"The place across from me, that's mine too. Why not stay there instead of going hotel hunting now." He couldn't help but smile when she turned back and took his elbow again to steady him. "Promise its got clean sheets and there's even beer in the frig."

"If you let me pay..."

"Let's get through the first night then we'll talk money," he interrupted.

Briar made the walk back to the car after depositing Reuben at his place having a mental debate with herself as to the loss of her sound judgment. Never in her life, including her heart attack, had she felt more frightened than when she turned and faced Mac's owner. She'd run before learning her name, and now she realized it wasn't because she was being rude; it was that she truly didn't want to know. Knowing was the first step in giving into something she was sure she didn't want.

"Just tonight, Briar. Then tomorrow you go back to the life you know," she told herself in the rearview mirror before starting the car. Reuben had told her where to park for the night.

He was alone when she returned. He gave her the key and treated her to the sandwich he'd fixed for her while he was waiting. "Don't take this wrong, but you need to get some sleep. You look a little wiped out."

"Thanks, Mr. Stickle."

"It's just Reuben. Mr. Stickle retired a few years back," he joked waving over his shoulder. "Good night."

"Goodnight."

She threw her bag on the bed then went to sit outside. Her phone registered over a hundred messages when she finally turned it on, making her feel guilty for not calling Shelia more often. It was still early enough to call but she opted for one more day of peace.

A soft whimpering sound stopped her from changing her mind on the call. It was coming from the dock and when looked, she saw Mac sitting there staring at her. There was no noise coming out of him except for the first whimper to get her attention.

"Are you going to take off if I get out of this chair?" He lay down with his head on his front paws at the question.

Briar stood and Mac went back to sitting making her stop, which made him put his head down again almost as a reassurance. That made her laugh as she stepped into the dock. Having him at her doorstep so to speak meant she had to face her fears and bring him back.

Mac started walking and surprised Briar again when he passed the small gangplank to his home opting instead for the very end of the pier. He sat down and turned his head toward her as if showing her he was waiting for her.

She took a seat bringing her feet close to the water when she let them dangle down. "Come here often?" She asked the dachshund.

From her pocket she took out something she'd found in her briefcase and just held it. The reminder of one of her simplest pleasures made her mourn for the things she couldn't have anymore. There had been something about enjoying a good cigar at the end of a long day that she'd looked forward to, which was now a thing of a very different past.

Instead of lighting it she brought it up and put in her mouth for a taste. "What you should be asking though is what the hell am I doing here? But even if you did, I wouldn't begin to know how to answer you. I'd be willing to bet you 2000 shares of IBM I couldn't find this particular spot again if someone put a gun to my head and said go."

The little dog put his head on her lap in a silent plea for her to pet him, so she did liking how warm he felt against her fingers. "If you call my mother though, she'd tell you the cosmos had something to do with it. Heck I always thought she was nuts, but here I am sitting on a dock talking to a very understanding dog."

He crawled into her lap and flipped over showing Briar his belly. "Who obviously appreciates the values of a good massage." She ran her hand in a slow circular motion not wanting to frighten him. "So I guess I'll wait until tomorrow to try and figure out what I'm suppose to be

doing here. Then I want some semblance of my life back."

A whimper came out of Mac again in protest at the comment it seemed to her. "You're a good listener, buddy. Maybe that's why I'm here. It's written in the stars I should get a small dog to listen to my problems."

"He's lousy at giving advice though."

The voice scared her so much the cigar in her mouth fell into the water, and Briar had to hang on to Mac to keep him from rolling in after it.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," said Megan. "Mind if I join you two."

Megan sat far enough away to give Briar her personal space. She laughed when Mac barked at being ignored too long. "I didn't get to my introductions earlier. This is Mac and I'm Megan."

"Briar." She offered her left hand since her right was occupied petting the dog. "I hope I wasn't disturbing you."

"You can sit wherever you like, I was just wondering where this trouble maker had gotten off to," she said pointing to Mac. "He's usually so standoffish."

Briar looked down at the totally relaxed dog with his paws in the air and laughed. "If this is standoffish I'd hate to see relaxed and comfortable. It must require Greek maidens and vats of scented oil."

"Mac only wishes he had that kind of budget. Is that what you're doing out here, relaxing?"

"In a way. Life's too short to not try new things don't you think?" She laughed at her joke, but noticed Megan just kept her eyes on the water. "I apologize if I was out of line. Small talk isn't my best quality."

"What is?"

"My best quality?" asked Briar in return. Mac stretched out even more making her want to laugh again, but instead she gave Megan's question some thought when she nodded. "My ability to forecast."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"You asked and I answered. I didn't realize there was a test attached for the quality of answer."

"That's not what I meant." Megan picked at the wood under her hand in a nervous sort of way. "I should've said I didn't understand your answer."

For some reason Claire pooped into her head, as did the last conversation she and Shelia were

having the day of her heart attack. The money - her money. Here under the sky full of stars with a dog in her lap she was just Briar anybody. Without the baggage she could finally see if people liked the person she was without the trappings all those correct forecasts could buy.

"I'm good at math should've been my answer if we're getting a do over."

"That's a talent not a quality," teased Megan glad to see Briar was still willing to talk. The nights were long with just Mac as a sounding board.

"Staying cool in every situation. How about that?"

Megan had to will her fingers to stop before she broke a nail on the wood. "In every situation?"

"There's no reason to fly off just because something goes wrong. Being wrong about something can cost you money or a hard time, but that's usually it."

"What about a someone?"

The question was so soft and sounded so hesitant that Briar could only guess it was laced with true pain. The kind that was fresh and new. "My father no matter what was going on, got up every morning had coffee, read the paper and ate a bowl of Cheerios. He always got up a couple of hours before everyone else, did all that then washed his bowl, rinsed out the coffee pot, refolded the paper, and went back to bed.

"When he sat to eat breakfast with my mom and me, I always thought he was a genius because he knew exactly everything that was going on." She pulled gently on the end of one of Mac's paws making him roll over to one side ready for his rubdown to continue. "The day he died he called me at my place at four in the morning."

"Why?" asked Megan. "Did he feel bad?"

"Four was his usual wake up time, and he felt fine. He called to tell me he loved me and that he was proud of me. He told me to take care of my mom if something happened, but he figured that part wasn't necessary because that was a given."

She could remember how cool it was out on her balcony that morning, what the headline of the Times was and how her eyes had watered at his thoughtfulness. "He gave me a few more tips before he hung up. My mom found him in his favorite chair when she missed him later that morning. The call was a break in his routine, which makes me believe he knew. I did what he asked and took care of my mom, the arrangements and his affairs."

"That must've been hard."

"Doing all that was easy because he gave me the strength of his confidence. I might not have done it perfect but I did my best, which makes anything I did wrong forgivable."



Megan was so quiet for so long that Mac got up and went to sit by her sensing she needed him. "Why'd you tell me that story?" she finally asked.

"Because even with that great call, that was out of his routine, there was a million more conversations I wish I'd had with him. That I'd had more time to tell him what was in my heart, but even if I didn't, I think he knew all that already." Briar put her hand flat on the wood and turned to Megan. In the moonlight her eyes appeared almost light gray. "You may not have done everything perfectly, but you did your best. That makes whatever is eating at you forgivable."

"Did Rueben..."

"Mr. Stickle invited me for coffee and told me about the beautiful woman he shared his life with, and about the kids he taught. Your question about someone made me assume you wanted some type of answer. I'm sorry if I was wrong." She stood and offered Megan a hand up. "If I was, perhaps you're right and forecasting isn't a quality after all. Good night and thanks for talking with me."

The word wait was screaming in her head but it never made it out of Megan's mouth. Instead she convinced herself she didn't want any complications in her life, and that's what Briar had written all over her.

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At five the next morning Briar was dressed and ready to go. The bed with the handmade quilt on it had been comfortable, but now it just held her packed bag.

She left it behind wanting to take one last look around before the long trip back. Something had called her here but the time for trying to decipher those clues was over.

The answer came at six fifteen when she sat on the levee drinking a glass of orange juice looking out over the water. A full cup of coffee sat untouched beside her. The sun rose behind her but still painted the sky the most amazing color of pink. The site made her glad she'd decided to say the morning and not leave while it was still dark out.

"I thought you didn't drink coffee?"

"Morning, Rueben, and I said no such thing. Besides I'm not drinking it, I'm enjoying the smell."

"You buy coffee that you don't plan on drinking?" He accepted her raised hand to take a seat next to her determined to find out something about her. "If you like the smell I'd think you'd like the taste."

"I love the taste of coffee. I'm just trying to cut it out of my diet along with a few other things." She offered him the cup, confident it was still warm enough to enjoy. "Just trying to be healthier these days." A big smile came over her face when she heard the barking as it got closer. It looked like Rueben wasn't the only one able to find where she was that morning.

"Mac, will you slow down," she heard Megan admonish him as his little legs carried him up the slope before she had made it half down the dock.

"Good morning, little fella. Came to tell me goodbye," said Briar, as he ran right at her. Rueben didn't make a comment about her leaving, waiting instead for Megan to make it to where they were sitting.

"Sorry, I should've kept him on the leash."

"Are you kidding? No one in my life has been this excited to see me," said Briar as she held him back from a complete tongue bath to her face.

"Now I won't have to feel so bad when I go to work if he has you to play with all day then." Briar opened her mouth to say she was leaving but nothing came out when Megan's eyes met hers. The blond hair mixed with the deep blue-green eyes was so beautiful it made her feel foolish for not noticing it before. "Are you all right?"

"Perfect," said Briar with a shake of her head. "Off to work so early?"

"It's the last day of school so we're both off to work today. Mac gets to come and cause a melt down in my class one day out of the year, but he's such a ham I can't deny him the opportunity to be adored by twenty-five screaming little kids."

"Why don't you take Briar with you and she can help you keep some kind of order," offered Rueben taking a sip out of the cup she'd handed him. Before either of them could protest, he got up and headed back to his place leaving an uncomfortable silence behind him.

"Listen I don't want to intrude on your day..." started Briar.

"And you don't have to feel obligated to come, so where does that leave us?"

"By a big lake with a small dog wanting to go to kindergarten today. How about if I come for a little while and hold the short one here and if I'm in the way I'll get out of your hair."

"Are you sure?"

Briar cocked her head back to get a better look at Megan. "Why do you think I'll scare your kids or something?"

Instead of answering, Megan helped her up and waved Briar and Mac on ahead of her. They left the lake in separate cars in case Briar wanted to head back earlier than two in the afternoon when Megan would be finished. It turned out the tall woman made more of a commotion than the dog did when they walked in together.

With patience she didn't know she possessed, Briar spent the day finger painting, reading and

making small clay shapes that resembled Mac who was posing for the class. For once Megan spent the day totally engaged in what she was doing and not dwelling on the pain in her heart.

That afternoon Briar followed Megan home again and accepted an invitation to dinner even though the day had been more tiring than she wanted to admit. When she arrived with a bottle of wine after asking Rueben where to shop, Megan led her to the small den that was adjacent to the kitchen.

"Want me to help with something?"

Megan looked at her and saw that the offer was sincere. "I getting ready to cut up some vegetables and sauté them as a side. If you want you can do that for me while I finish with the chicken." The panicked expression on Briar's face was so comical she came close to laughing. "Or you could tear lettuce for the salad."

"No I offered to help and I meant it." Briar eyed the stove like it was going to come to life and attack her, and was having a hard time coming up with the actual meaning of sauté.

A pile of vegetables was sitting on a cutting board and Briar treated them like live grenades. With a deep breath she picked up a knife, and like she did with her pen, she twirled it in between her fingers before she started. It felt like she was channeling Julia Child when the blade made quick and efficient work of the pile turning it into bite sized pieces.

She then poured a small amount of olive oil in a large skillet, heated it and knew somehow when to add the vegetables. Once everything was sizzling, Briar flipped her wrist in a style Emeril would be proud of to stir everything without using a utensil.

Something about the movements made Megan think she was watching Vivian with different coloring. From the way Briar handled a knife to the way she maneuvered the large skillet was so familiar it made her soul ache.

"There you go," said Briar sounding as surprised as she looked. Maybe all that television she'd watched while she was at home recuperating had paid off. "Anything else you need me to do?"

"Just sit and eat. I'll take care of the rest."

They went up to the deck to enjoy the mild night along with the bottle of wine Briar had brought for dinner. For two people who'd just met they were comfortable in silence for long stretches. When dinner was over Megan was reluctant to get up, but was having trouble saying what was on her mind.

"I've found that if you just spit it out, you're less likely to develop an ulcer."

She rolled her half full glass of wine between her hands and just stared at Briar for the longest time without saying anything. "How do you know something's eating at me?"

"Your shoulders are slumped, you get a small furrow between your brows and you don't know what to do with your hands," Briar ticked them off on her fingers.

"Are you a detective or something?"

"I know you told me forecasting isn't a quality, but when you need a map to the future you have to use landmarks from today. A lot of those come from the comfort of numbers and hard data, but the rest have to come from the people trying to sell you on all that information." Briar poured herself another glass of water and leaned back into her chair.

"So your job requires you to read people?" In an effort to prove Briar wrong, she put her glass down and placed her hands on the armrests in an attempt to look at ease.

"It's a little more complicated than that, but to an extent yes. Megan, you just seem like something's really bothering you and it's so heavy to carry around it's what's making your shoulders slump. Sometimes I've found it helps to tell a complete stranger. Hearing the words out loud are like taking aspirin when you have a headache."

Looking up at Briar through pale lashes, she tried her best to steel her courage. It had been months since Vivian's accident and Briar was right. The pain was just getting worse not better. Until even now she hadn't been able to say the words out loud even when she was alone. Their relationship wasn't passionate, but it had been comfortable. Why hadn't that been enough?

"I'm sorry to push you. Just forget I said anything and just enjoy the moon," said Briar when it looked like Megan would rather be shot than utter a single word.

"I used to have a partner. Her name was Vivian and she was killed in an accident recently," started Megan sounding like the pure definition of misery. She went on to tell Briar about the day at the hospital and the funeral services afterward. "She was such a good person and I miss her."

Briar listened and tried not to read too much into what Megan wasn't saying. There was more, of that she was sure but whatever it was she couldn't bring herself to say it, and Briar didn't feel like it was her place to push. She was leaving soon and as much as she wanted to help, Megan wasn't ready to let anyone in, especially a stranger. And that's what she was to this woman.

"I'm sorry for what you lost. I wish I could tell you that I know what you're feeling, but I can't. I loved my father, and while that still hurts to think about, I can't imagine what it must be like to lose the person you shared your life with. It might've been better for you to have my mother here to talk to," said Briar after Megan's voice faded away.

"Just having you listen helped a lot so don't sell yourself short."

"Trust me, selling short is as close to committing a sin as I come," said Briar even though Megan didn't get the joke. "It's that whole 'walking a mile in your shoes' thing. My mom and dad found each other and built the kind of relationship that people describe as all fireworks and champagne. They were crazy about each other until that final day. Unless I'm very wrong there will never be

anyone in my mother's life to fill that gap he left. I've never found that in my life so I have no reference to work from to make you feel better."

"You're an interesting person, Briar," Megan said as she picked up her glass again to take a sip of wine. "Even if you haven't walked in my shoes, you're a good listener."

"Maybe I should put that at the top of my best qualities list then."

"Maybe," she said. Megan took a little time just studying Briar's face. Just like on hers there were traces of something akin to sadness that was etched around her eyes. "If your mother did find someone else, would that bother you?" The question was for her benefit and for her own situation, but she couldn't believe it came out of her mouth. "I'm sorry, you don't have to answer that."

"I don't mind. My mom is a unique person - I'm talking way unique. Someone like her shouldn't spend the rest of her life mourning something she can't change." Briar spoke slowly, picking her words carefully. If they somehow helped Megan get passed whatever was in her heart, then her trip here wasn't in vain. She had followed her heart and perhaps this was what she had been meant to do. "That doesn't mean I think she'll forget what they shared, or that she'll find someone who'll recreate the life they shared, but she deserves the chance to be happy."

"Do you think your father would be all right with that?"

"My father loved my mother with every bit of his being. He never neglected me or made me feel that I wasn't important to him, but I believe he loved her so much he'd want her to find something or someone to be happy about."

Megan reached across the table and placed her hand over Briar's. "Thank you for tonight. It's been some rough months but talking about it really did help."

"Let me help you carry all this stuff downstairs. I'll even help wash."

"You're my guest, and guests don't do dishes. Just leave them and I'll get them after I walk Mac."

Ignoring the directive, Briar picked up the plates and carried them into the kitchen sink. She stopped in front of the small refrigerator and looked at the pictures of which she assumed to be Vivian and Megan together. They made an attractive couple, and from the size of their smiles, she could tell they were happy.

"Those were from a few years ago," supplied Megan. "I believe it was the last vacation we took together."

"Thanks for dinner." It was an inane thing to say to end the evening but Briar was at a loss for anything else.

"Can we do it again soon? I'm off from school for the next few months so if you want I could

show you around town." Megan walked her to the door stopping to pick up Mac's leash along the way. "Only if you want that is, please don't feel obligated."

"I'd love to, only if you feel the same way."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you've been looking forward to your vacation time so don't feel like you have to spend it showing me around." She bent down and gave Mac a scratch under his chin before smiling for Megan and opening the door. "Just think about it. You know where to find me."

"Thanks," said Megan sounding relieved. "Good night." She smiled when Briar lifted her hand and waved without turning around. A friend who didn't push her too hard and listened with such compassion might be just what she needed at the moment.

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"I realize it's late and I'm sorry, but I need you to do some stuff for me," said Briar as she unpacked the bag on the bed and tried to get Shelia to calm down.

"Where are you?"

She made a mental note to go shopping the next day for more clothes and essentials if she stayed until she felt she was leaving Megan in a better place emotionally. For once in her life Briar felt like she could make a difference and not just in someone's retirement fund.

"I'm in New Orleans taking some time off."

"I realize you're in New Orleans, you left me a message because you were too chicken to talk to me directly. What I want to know is where in New Orleans?"

"I'm not staying at a hotel so you can reach me by cell if you need me, and before you ask, I'm fine and the place I have is great. You'd love it. All there is to do is watch the water and the sun rise and set."

Shelia sat up in bed and grabbed a pad and pen along with her appointment book after patting her partner on the shoulder to let her know it was all right to go back to sleep. "Uh huh, you do realize you have a doctor's appointment this week. And we have to close the quarter at work. Accounting said they could put it off for about another week but that's it. I'm sure we can do it without you but I don't want to hear any bitching if you're not here."

"I trust you to keep things running smoothly, and I didn't forget about the doctor's visit. The first thing I need is a referral for here and I need you to send me the information I need to get into the office accounts. I promise I'll keep an eye on things from the laptop."

"Briar, are you sure you're all right? Do you want me to come down there with you?"

"All my life I've tried to be like my father, Shelia, but for once I'm going to give mom's way a try. I got a second chance to live my life, and I want to help someone else see that there's that same chance for her. Mom told me to follow my heart and it's telling me this is right."

Shelia sighed into the phone feeling a little frustrated that she couldn't be more help. "Just remember one thing okay?"

"What's that?"

"You did all right with the first heart you had, so don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Take all the time you need and don't worry about work, I'll handle it."

"You know if it wasn't for Muriel I would've stolen you away years ago. Thanks for being so good to me."

"I'll hold you to that if she ever decides to run off on me," Shelia teased back. "And no need to thank me. You gave me the chance of a lifetime as cliché as that sounds when you hired me. I'll never forget that."

"Take care then and I'll call you with any trading I want you to do. I'll be watching the markets from here."

She heard Mac barking right outside her window after she brushed her teeth and was ready to get into bed. The glass of juice she'd poured was sitting on the nightstand along with the pile of pills she was now taking on a daily basis. There had been a detailed explanation that came with every single prescription. One was so her blood would circulate and not form clots, another set were so her body wouldn't reject the new organ and the others she wasn't sure about since she'd stopped listening at that point. It wasn't that she didn't care about her survival but the chemistry of making her body function was more information than she needed.

After her medical cocktail, she lay down and concentrated on the sound of the water hitting against the houseboat. It was relaxing like the sound machine back in her office that Shelia had bought for her. The day she'd spent with Megan drifted through her head like an inner tube on a lazy river. How different Megan seemed from the woman in all those pictures on the refrigerator. Like her parents, the couple captured in those images looked happy.

She rubbed the scar on her naked chest and let her thoughts drift back to Claire; the someone in her life who'd been willing to share her bed and her home to be taken care of and enjoy what the money could buy. That was so different from sharing a life.

When Briar caught herself running her fingers along her new adornment, something else occurred to her. "What woman would take a chance on me now?" Was it really fair to fall in love with someone only to leave her in the kind of pain Megan was in now?

That troubling question was the last thing that repeated over and over again before she finally fell

asleep. The only answer was to keep her secrets and be satisfied with the life she had. There was her mother and Shelia and it would have to be enough.

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At four thirty her eyes opened and Briar knew it was a losing battle trying to go back to sleep. She got ready then went out to the first newsstand she could find, scaring the owner who was still cutting open bundles.

She arrived back at the houseboat with four papers and a fresh cup of coffee that she uncapped and put beside her on the small table at the end of the deck. Until the doctor okayed it, the aroma would have to do. So she contented herself with grapefruit juice and a handful of pills to start the morning.

She'd read through all four papers as the sun started to rise then neatly folded them and stacked them on the table. It was then she noticed the visitor who'd come aboard while she was engrossed with the Wall Street Journal. Not finding it as fascinating, Mac had curled up a few feet from her and taken a nap.

"I'm going to have to go shopping for dog treats if you're going to keep coming over. Rueben keeps talking about southern hospitality and I don't want you thinking New Yorkers are rude." She teased with him as he tried his best to jump onto her lap, her voice having woken him up.

When she lifted him up, Mac immediately did his best to lick every inch of her face. How Megan could think this dog was standoffish was beyond her, but she was just glad he liked her so much. The early morning and having Mac stretched out against her chest with his warm body made Briar lean back in the chair and put her feet up. Not much later they were both asleep and that's how Megan found them.

She took in the empty glass of juice, the full cup of coffee and the stack of papers and figured Briar was very much like the man she spoke so fondly of. Getting the opportunity to study her new friend without fear of getting caught, Megan noticed how tired Briar looked even though she was sleeping. The night before as she was telling her about Vivian, Briar was also rubbing her chest like there was something bothering her, but she didn't appear to be in pain.

Her eyes followed the path of Briar's body looking for any sign of injury but found none. When she came back to her face she was surprised by the alert eyes and relaxed smile. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't, I think our little pal is dreaming about burying something." Briar didn't move and tried to ignore the way the sun made Megan's hair appear almost golden.

"Do you know all there is to know now?" asked Megan pointing to all the papers.

"How do you know I read them all?"



"Call it a hunch on my part." Her smile grew larger at the gentle way Briar held Mac. He was on the small side but he was usually a menace to anyone new, so having him feel so comfortable with her was a testament to Mac seeing something in Briar that was good.

"I read them, but as a teacher you should realize I'm far from knowing all there is to know."

She laughed surprising herself she still knew how. "Not an intellectual snob then, got it."

"Not even close, lady. I plead ignorance on a whole slew of things."

Megan leaned in as if wanting to continue the teasing banter. "I find it hard to believe you're ignorant on any subject."

"It's true. The first topic for instance I know nothing about is, it's your first day of summer vacation and I have no idea what you want to do."

"The one thing all kindergarten teachers want to do on their first day off of course."

Mac turned over on her chest wanting to feel the sun on his belly making his ears flap onto her chest. "Hedonists could learn something from this dog," Briar joked at the move. "Sorry, didn't mean to change the subject. So tell me, Miss Megan. What do kindergarten teachers do after a long, hard year?"

"They go off to art museums and look at things that were created sans finger paint. Not that I'm not a fan of finger paint but it's nice to look at pieces that are dry and aren't a danger to my clothing."

Briar nodded at the answer. "Do these sculptors of the future also do lunch per chance?"

"Will you let me cut up your meat for you?"

"Absolutely," teased Briar.

"Then I'd love to have lunch with you."

Going through a mental inventory of her wardrobe, Briar figured the suit she'd left New York in was the only thing she had that would suffice. "Can you give me a couple of hours?"

"Sure, the place I have in mind doesn't open until ten."

With a phone call to Shelia, Briar found the nearest dry cleaner. They promised to deliver it within the hour so she used the time to work. The market was open and some of the pharmaceutical stocks she was watching looked ready to move. Another call to Shelia set the parameters for a buy and what the guys needed to start working the phones.

At ten she knocked on Megan's door, glad she'd gone through the trouble of dry cleaning the suit.

Megan was wearing a linen dress with sandals and had taken the time to fix her hair.

"You don't look anything like the memory of my kindergarten teacher."

"Mission accomplished then, thank you. I'm going incognito today. I love my job but every once in a while it's nice to put on something that requires a little effort." She hated to compare Briar to Vivian, but she couldn't believe how good Briar looked in blue pinstripes, or that she had actually understood what kind of day she wanted. Unless it was a wedding or a funeral Viv or wouldn't think of dressing up to go out.

Briar walked her to the jeep after breaking the news to Mac he had to stay behind. She received a surprised look when she stepped to the passenger door and opened it for Megan. It was as if it was a new concept for her.

"Where to?" she asked as she slipped the key in the ignition.

"Want to try the Lowe Museum?" Megan pointed in the direction of the interstate when Briar got to the top of the levee.

"That's the new one in town isn't it?"

"It opened just this year actually. Julian Lowe came up with the concept as a tribute to her mother. I love it because it has such a diverse collection of art. There's even a special exhibit of new up and coming artists."

After they parked, they walked the gallery slowly admiring works from classic to contemporary art. Briar had to smile when she saw the name of the major sponsor of the exhibit Megan had wanted to see of new artists. Henley Kilston was written in bold letters with a small acknowledgment for her generosity.

"What do you think of this one?" asked Megan when she saw that she'd lost Briar. She backed track and took a look at what Briar was reading. "Friend of yours."

"You can say that. She's my mother." Briar said it with such wry humor that Megan decided not to push her on it.

"Come on then and tell me what you think of this one."

"It looks like he should keep his day job," she teased. The canvas was blank except for three very small dots along the bottom done in red and another three dots done in yellow in the very center. "I've always been of the opinion if I can do it, it's not art."

"Art critic huh?"

"Maybe I'm just hungry." Briar glanced down at her watch and tried to remember what time Shelia had made their reservations for. "How about I buy you lunch and you can explain to me

what deep meaning I'm missing in this thought provoking piece?"

They took their time walking in the direction of the French Market to the Bella Luna restaurant. As they passed a clothing store at the Jax Brewery Mall, Megan looked at the seersucker suit in the window and imagined how Briar would look in it. "Do you have one of those?" she pointed to the outfit.

"New York isn't really known for their selection of seersucker but I might buck that trend if you're really fond of the look."

"You'd buy an outfit just because I like it?"

"Why not? I have to wear a suit to work everyday, so if I own one that you happen to like what's the harm? The one I have on now is my secretary's favorite, though it isn't really meant for stifling temperatures."

"Can I confess something to you?"

"Will it require you to kill me afterward?"

Megan laughed and thanked whatever higher power had brought Briar her way. "Only if you tell other people." She paused and as was her habit when she was nervous, she ran her fingers through the side of her head and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "I really wasn't looking forward to this summer. At least with the kids and the comfort of a routine, I didn't really have a lot of time to dwell on the fact that I'm alone now."

"What about now?" Briar took her hands in an effort to comfort her and try and center Megan's thoughts.

"Today isn't so bad, and I know you can't stay forever but I'm going to try and enjoy our time together while I have the chance."

"I can stay as long as you want me to, Megan."

She looked at their linked hands and noticed how small hers were in comparison to Briar's. What struck her was not that Briar was being out of line by taking hers, but how cold the soft hands were. "You would do that for me?"

"Of course I would. Besides I don't think I could leave you and Mac all alone if all you two are going to do is mope all the time. I can work from here so don't worry about it." She let go of one of Megan's hands but pulled her gently down the street with the other thinking there was nothing else to say. If she did Briar figured the tears in Megan's eyes would only come down and she didn't want to ruin the young woman's day.

Once they walked passed Café DuMonde they followed the alleyway behind it to the restaurant. On the second floor about a block away was one of the best open secrets of the French Quarter.

With the windows thrown open there was an excellent view of the river traffic, and the crystal of the Venetian blown glass looked as if it deserved to be in the museum they'd just left.

"Ms. Kilston, this way please," said the hostess.

Megan placed the name into memory, having not really studied it on the plaque in the museum, and followed the woman to one of the tables by an open window. "Have you been here before?" asked Briar.

"I think we were some of the few people who live here who hardly ever went out to dinner," said Megan.

"I haven't visited New Orleans frequently, but can't you be arrested for that if you actually live here?"

The teasing remark made Megan laugh, a sound Briar was coming to like. "We were always saving for one thing or another so it wasn't important. Vivian liked to cook so it wasn't a problem sharing that chore."

"Considering I can't boil water, I eat out a lot."

Remembering how comfortable Briar looked in the kitchen the night before she was confused. "What about last night?"

"Last night was a fluke I'm still trying to figure out myself, so don't ask me to explain." She opened the menu with a huge smile on her face, "Today though, I'll show you my true specialty."

"Pouring water that you're thinking about boiling?"

"Feisty, I like that. My true specialty is ordering," joked Briar.

Their waiter recommended a few of the specials available and left them to the serenity of the place. As much as Briar complained at not being good at small talk, with her quick banter she was able to bring Megan out of her shell.

"You know something?" asked Megan as the waiter put down the crème brule Briar had insisted she order.

"That I'm getting the check so you can stop trying to signal the waiter?" Briar asked as she put a piece of cheesecake in her mouth. As a New Yorker she felt it was her mission in life to order the particular dessert the city was known for and compare it.

"Yes besides that."

"What?" She held up a piece of dessert on her fork and offered it to Megan.

"You know all there is to know about me and I know next to nothing about you."

She accepted the offering of Megan's dessert before answering. "What would you like to know?"

"Anything you want to tell me."

"I live alone, I'm a stockbroker and I have no pets."

Megan had to cover her mouth to keep from spitting anything out when she started laughing. "And does your name, rank and serial number come with that long explanation?" she asked.

The incredibly pale blue eyes twinkled at her from over the rim of Briar's water glass. "Call me modest, but I hate talking about myself."

"Okay, modest, have I completely exhausted your art appreciating for the day or are you willing to finish?"

Briar took her wallet out of the inside pocket of her jacket and took care of the check. "Are you kidding? I'm still anxiously awaiting your explanation as to what I'm not seeing in that dot painting. Well technically it can't be called a painting since there are only six dabs of paint on the whole blank canvas so I'll go with dabbing instead of painting."

Not thinking Briar would mind, Megan took her arm for the walk back. They made the five block trek in silence, smiling to the security guard at the door on the way back in. It was late in the afternoon before they started back to the car. Megan knew if she had one wish it would be used it to grant another day just like today.

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For the next two months they followed the same routine. Briar would get up at her usual ridiculously early hour, read her papers and play with Mac until Megan emerged from her place.

They found that they enjoyed spending time together and Briar tried not to think about having to go home as Megan started having to think about going back to school if only to get her classroom ready. In the time they had spent together she'd learned more about Megan's life with Vivian and had even offered a shoulder to cry on when the memories got to be too much. The more those stories emerged though, the better Megan seemed to become, and Briar was left with an empty feeling at not being needed anymore. Then there was her heart.

Over the weeks with all the walking and the more balanced diet, she had started to lose the gauntness in her face and her skin was more toned. The new doctor was monitoring her progress and was pleased with the way her body was adjusting to the new organ that was keeping her alive.

Megan found Briar very easy to talk to, but her guilt concerning Vivian was starting to grow for other reasons. The logical part of her brain warned it was too early after her partner's death to

start finding someone else so attractive. It was hard not to though. Briar went out of her way to find things to do around town, on the pretense of playing a tourist that she was sure Megan would like. They had gone to concerts in the park, gone out to dinner, visited every museum in the area and taken long walks with Mac along the levee.

All those outings weren't complete unless Briar found some excuse to take her hand or offer an arm for her to hold while they were out. The dreams she'd had of being swept away by someone were coming true, but it was at the expense of losing Vivian and Megan's heart couldn't accept that.

Through her bedroom window she watched Briar fold the last of her papers so she could pick up the sleepy Mac at her feet. The dog cuddled into her chest as Briar picked up one of his floppy ears and whispered something to him. A chaise lounge with a thick cushion was added to the original chair that was on the deck, and Rueben would sometimes be using it when they returned from an outing. The retired schoolteacher and Briar would spend a little time together everyday, usually arguing over something like how much rent Briar was going to pay that week.

"You're up early today, Miss Megan," said Briar when she saw her walking over.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Bad dream?"

Megan shook her head and fell into the chair. "Just woke up, and I'm not liking it."

Pushing over, Briar held out her hand and took a chance. "Then how about you come over here and I'll help you get some more sleep."

Mac growled a little at the moving and rearranging but just as quickly settled down once everyone was situated. Tentative at first, Megan was stiff from nerves until Briar put her free arm around her so she could put her head on her chest to get more comfortable. This closeness with someone, listening to their heartbeat was what Megan missed most, and they both tried to ignore the tears falling down her cheeks as she drifted into a restful sleep.

"Feel better?"

Megan didn't move wanting to enjoy the warmth of Briar's body a little longer. "I know you probably think I'm crazy but I do feel better."

"Megan, are you all right?"

The relaxed feeling left her body when she heard the question posed in a deep voice coming from the dock. Alan had left more than enough messages that she hadn't returned because she was always busy with Briar.

"I'm fine," she said as she sat up. "What brings you down here so early?"

"It's ten in the morning and it's Saturday. I thought I'd come to the mountain since you can't be bothered to answer calls." He folded his arms over his chest and tried to look intimidating.

"Who's your friend?"

"Stop it, Al. We're not six anymore and I don't need protecting." She stood up and held her hand out to Briar. "This is Briar Kilston. Briar, my brother Alan."

They shook hands and Briar almost laughed when the guy just glared at her like he'd caught her having sex with his under aged sister. "Nice to meet you, Alan. Why don't you two talk while I run up the way and get a cup of coffee."

"You don't drink coffee," said Megan moving closer to Briar and lowering her voice.

"I like the smell. Don't ask. It's in the same vein that I love a good cigar."

"You don't ever light them."

"There you go. Enjoy your vices but only in moderation," said Briar laughing.

"You don't have to leave you know."

"Don't worry, I promise I'm not going far. If you need reinforcements you have my cell number." She squeezed Megan's hand and just caught herself before she bent down and placed a kiss on her forehead. "Alan, it was nice meeting you."

The site of his sister lying so close to someone who wasn't his best friend for some reason made Alan really angry so he just glared at her again and didn't answer her. He didn't take his eyes off of her until she reached the end of the dock and headed for the path up the levee.

"Why not beat your chest while you're out there to complete the full ape man routine you have going," said Megan as she picked Mac up so they could head back to her place.

"I come over here expecting to find you locked in some serious grieving self-pity, but instead you're making time with the neighbor. What the hell is that?"

"The thing you should really be asking yourself is when in the hell did you appoint yourself my keeper? First you want me to move in with you and your wife because you're worried I'm not getting out enough. Now I make a new friend and I'm some sort of slut." She walked past him sounding more and more disgusted. "Make up your mind, Alan, because you can't have it both ways."

"She hasn't been gone that long."

Megan stopped walking and turned back to face him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You didn't let me finish. Vivian hasn't been gone that long so I don't want some idiot coming in here and taking advantage of you while you're not at your best." He put his hands out to his sides in an act of surrender. "I'm just worried about you and mom keeps calling me and asking about you. I don't know what to tell her half the time."

"Mom could damn well get in her car and come down here if she's so worried about me. Or better yet, she could pick up the phone and ask me herself." Her relationship with their mother had become strained after she found out Megan's life wasn't going to turn out like she'd planned from the time she was still in diapers. "The best option to go with though, is telling her I'm still gay. That should limit your conversations to what a great son you are and what a disappointment I turned out to be."

"Meg, I'm not the enemy here. I'm worried about you and I miss you. Just because Vivian died doesn't mean our relationship should as well."

"I'm sorry. It's been a weird time for me and I don't mean to take it out on you."

They went inside and she laughed when Mac went to lie by the door as if waiting for someone to come home. It's how he spent most of his time now that Briar had come into their lives. As contentious as their morning had started, they quickly fell back into a more friendly exchange catching up on their lives.

Alan had taken over the boat and had started to put Vivian's share into a trust for his sister. He knew she wouldn't take it, so he was saving it for her future. It had taken weeks for him to be able to take the vessel out without his eyes watering not seeing Vivian behind the wheel, but life had gotten easier with time for him as it had for Megan.

"So tell me about your new friend," he said.

"Briar's just here on an extended vacation and we've been doing some stuff together."

He nodded and looked at the sad dog by the door. "The way I found the two of you this morning makes me believe there's more to it than that."

"She likes doing some of the same things I do, she's a good listener and she doesn't push for more than I'm willing to give. Right now, that's a godsend to me."

"What's in it for her?"

The question reminded her of flaky pastry. If you took your fork to it, you could peel it away in layers. "Just to be my friend I guess. Briar doesn't strike me as the kind of person with a big hidden agenda."

"Just be careful okay?"

Not wanting to pry anymore, Alan spent the rest of the morning enjoying his sister's company.



Before he left there was a knock on the door and he opened it to the mailman. He signed for the envelope and couldn't help looking at the return address and name. The organ transplant organization's logo was distinct and popped right off the page, and he saw how Megan's hands shook as he handed it to her.

"You want me to go?" he asked.

She shook her head and went to sit on the sofa. He sat across from her as she tore it open and pulled out the sealed envelope it contained. Attached to it was a sticky note explaining it was from the recipient of Vivian's heart.

*I woke up last night from a bad dream and found my heart beating noticeably when I sat up in bed. A year ago I wouldn't have given it another thought. I'd have rolled over and gone back to sleep, but now I give thanks even for bad dreams.*

*Why you ask? Because even bad dreams are something I thought I'd never have again. My life has been filled with good and bad experiences that come with time, but that I have a life at all is what's important to me now. That is a gift I owe to you and your family.*

*A few months ago I felt invincible. I had a job I loved and a life I was comfortable with, but one morning I came so close to losing all of it because of a heart attack. Waking up in a hospital room with the news that your chance for survival is bleak puts things in perspective like nothing you'll ever experience.*

*Life is a fragile thing that I had taken for granted too many times before that day. It's a mistake I won't repeat in the future, especially knowing the sacrifice your loved one made so that I can have a future.*

*I promise more than anything that for the rest of my days, whether they are limited or many, your loved one will be in my thoughts. There isn't a picture of their smile, no memory of their laugh or an inkling of what they loved, but a big part of what made them unique is now a part of me and I promise to take care of it.*

*When I was asked to write this to you, I wondered how I could ever express my sympathies for your loss. I can't. Not in anyway that will be meaningful to you because you have to face the future without the person you love. I am sorry though.*

*Our paths will most probably never cross, and because of the rules of the organization, we will never meet, so my words here will have to suffice. Just know that if you need to find meaning in what has happened, it comes in the lives your loved one touched with the gifts they made.*

*To me it is the true meaning of generosity, and for that I thank you.*

Alan watched as she read the pages a few times before she brought them to her chest. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I just need a minute." Megan pulled them away again and read them one more time. "I thought this wasn't necessary when they asked me the day I signed the papers so they could harvest the organs, but I'm glad I checked the yes box on the form. This person is right. Vivian was generous to a fault when she was alive and now that she's gone, her legacy will keep going." She'd asked Vivian for a sign that it was all right to go on with her life and Megan chose to believe she was holding it in her hand.

He took the letter from her when she offered and read the words. "Maybe they're right."

"About what?"

"Viv's gone, but there's more than one person out there that has a chance at a normal life. What happened wasn't fair, but I'm glad she was able to help people who had no chance at all."

Megan moved to the arm of the chair he was sitting on and put her arms around him. "I just hope you're right and this gets easier with time. That's why I want you to cut Briar some slack. You might not like me making new friends you don't know, but she's helped me with all this."

After Megan made them both breakfast, Alan left her to get ready for the day finding Briar sitting outside again reading a magazine. She was attractive and seemed friendly enough but he decided to err on the side of caution. "My sister seems to like you."

"Is this like passing me a note in homeroom?" asked Briar not raising her eyes from the page she was reading. "You can save the big brother routine. I don't want anything from your sister except to help her in anyway I can."

"Hurt her and I'll feed you to the crabs out here."

She rubbed her scar and smiled confident he couldn't see her. "I'll keep that in mind on the off chance I get the urge to do something stupid."

"I'm serious, just remember that."

Twenty minutes later Megan came back dressed in an old pair of shorts and a t-shirt. She sat on the chaise lounge with Briar and folded her hands over her knee. "I'm sorry about this morning." She'd cried some more in the shower after Alan had left, but the letter while unexpected had brought her some peace.

"Sorry you came over here and shared the morning with me, or sorry you think your brother ran me off?"

"I'm sorry about Alan. He still feels the need to treat me like I'm in the second grade, and everything that's happened has sent that into overdrive."

"Uh huh," said Briar putting her hand on her chin. "I know how you can make this most egregious of offenses up to me."

Megan laughed and leaned back into Briar's legs. "I'm sure it's something like washing the jeep for you so let's hear it."

"Remember that For Art's Sake Night you told me about?"

They'd been in the modern art museum when Megan had mentioned an event that was held in August as a sort of farewell to summer that also raised money for local artists. She'd read about it often but had never attended the social event that took place on Magazine Street from one in to the other in all the galleries. There was wine and drinks along the way and most of the places had a catered spread for anyone wandering in from the street.

"I remember," said Megan.

"I was hoping you'd go with me, then have dinner at Emeril's when you get tired of walking." She smiled when Megan accepted her hand. With a little encouragement they were back in the same position before Alan had interrupted them. "As added incentive to say yes, I have a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

Briar pulled her closer and enjoyed the scent of Megan's perfume. "The only option for you here is yes or no. What is it, isn't a choice."

She tipped her head up and looked into Briar's eyes. They were as pale blue a color as you could get without it being light gray, and the most interesting she'd ever seen. She wondered if anyone ever said no to Briar about anything. Bathing in the compassion she could see so clearly in those blue eyes she thought how very easy it would be to spend a lifetime giving the only answer that slipped so easily off her lips.

"Yes."

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At around five that afternoon, the expected knock on her door made Megan's heart beat faster. Something had changed between them that morning and she was actually looking forward to seeing if it grew into something more as the night progressed.

Briar was always attentive, but throughout the morning and during lunch they very seldom were more than two feet away from each other and more often than not were either holding hands or touching in some way. It had been torture to separate so they could get ready for their date, and in Megan's mind that's what it was.

"Coming," she called out taking the time to take one more glance in the mirror to make sure her hair was still in the twist she'd put it in. The one dress Briar had yet to see had been her choice for the evening. The deep blue silk dress was something she'd picked up on a whim and had

never worn.

The door held her up after she opened it, leaning against it taking in how incredible Briar looked. That seersucker suit they'd seen in the window the afternoon they'd walked to lunch draped beautifully from the broad shoulders, and the white shirt appeared even more so against the tanned skin.

"You look like you should be sipping a drink on a veranda somewhere," said Megan.

"Too southern for you?"

"I'm from the south, so no. You actually look great, but you won't get much use out of that suit now so I should've insisted you get it earlier." She stepped back and had her ego boosted with the way Briar's eyes raked from her head down to her feet and back again.

"I'm merely mediocre compared to you," she took Megan's hands and turned her around to see the dress from all sides. "You look incredible."

Megan could feel her ears getting hot and just knew the compliment had colored her cheeks in a blush. It didn't matter though, because the way Briar couldn't tear her eyes away told her she was sincere. "Thank you."

She picked up her purse and accepted Briar's hand after Mac had gotten his conciliatory talk from his new best friend before they left. As they made their way down the dock, Rueben waved to them letting out a wolf whistle for the good looking couple.

Confident Briar was learning her way around town, Megan sat almost sideways on the way downtown wanting to just take Briar in. They didn't talk about anything important along the way and whenever they had to come to a stop, Briar would turn her head and give Megan her undivided attention. After their time together it was something she'd come to expect and Briar never disappointed her.

They walked the galleries and Megan noticed how people deferred to Briar whenever they walked into someplace new. There was something about her that exuded power and something else she couldn't quite figure but enjoyed the detailed explanations they got on certain pieces that they liked as they explored.

"Ready to take a little break?" asked Briar.

"If I say yes, will you feed me?"

"If you say yes, I'll give you whatever you desire, pretty lady." They bypassed the line at Emeril's and were shown to their table. Most of the people waiting hadn't thought to make a reservation, or they didn't have the ever-efficient Shelia working for them.

Dinner was excellent and they laughed their way through four courses and a dessert before they

were ready to hit a few more places before they went home. In the second gallery across the street from the restaurant they found a few more pieces by the artist that had painted the small dots on the blank canvas on display at the Lowe Museum.

"If you'd like to meet the artist he's here," said the owner after they'd stopped in front of the guy's newest work. It was still a blank canvas but now instead of circles there were triangles and squares adorning limited space.

"We'd love to," said Briar.

"Please tell me you're going to behave," warned Megan. She gladly moved closer when Briar put her arm around her waist and smiled down at her.

"Of course I'm going to behave. How else am I going to get the deep meaning behind these works of creative genius?"

Megan placed her hand on Briar's stomach and waited as if there were a punch line coming. "You think this guy's a genius?"

"If he can get anyone to pay that price for what amounts to an ounce of paint at most, I say yes." She wiggled her brows making Megan laugh. "What though pray tell will happen to me if I decide not to behave?"

"Oh there are so many possibilities it's mind boggling." She moved her hand higher up Briar's chest until it rested over her heart.

"I think that we need to get out of here and discuss it in detail then." Slowly so that Megan would have every chance to stop her, she lifted the hand on her chest and kissed the palm. When her lips pressed against the soft surface, Briar enjoyed the way Megan almost fell against her.

"I think that's a fabulous idea."

For the first time since arriving Briar longed for the car and driver she had in New York. The jeep was great but with the console in the middle it prevented her from pulling Megan as close as she wanted. As they got closer to the lake the feelings of fear also came back.

Megan was different than all the other women in Briar's life. The feelings missing for so long with people like Claire raged in her when it came to Megan. With her, the urge to drop to one knee and declare her devotion was something she had to fight on a constant basis, and that's what scared her. It was one thing to desire someone in your life, but she hadn't considered that the feelings may not be reciprocated. Not that Megan didn't appear interested, but was she only a bridge to help her over her pain?

They walked slowly to the end of the dock to Megan's place and went up to the sundeck. It was almost the end of August and the nights were still warm, but the wind was starting to change direction making standing outside bearable.

Megan stood facing the water with her hands on the railing and sighed when Briar came to stand behind her. There was plenty of light from the full moon to see clearly the big hands came to rest next to hers when Briar moved in closer.

She went willingly when Briar turned her around and placed her hand so lovingly on the side of her face. "You are so beautiful," said Briar.

"I almost believe you when you say it looking at me like that."

"Megan...honey, if no one has ever told you that and meant it, then you've been seriously cheated in this life." Briar ran her thumb along the smooth skin catching the tear that had escaped the bright eyes. She just knew the tears came not from sorrow, grief or pain, but from happiness. The fact that she could create that feeling in Megan made her own eyes water.

Briar bent her head and kissed her as slowly as she had in the gallery when she kissed Megan's hand. The moan that escaped her couldn't be helped when she felt Megan's mouth let her in.

"I've been waiting for you to do that for days," said Megan as she rested her head against Briar's chest when they pulled apart. "You've awakened something in me, and for once in my life, I want to be selfish and ask for more."

"When we want the same things, and it's something that makes you happy, then you're not being selfish." Briar put her arms around her and held Megan so close that she could feel every inch of her. "I realize how hard losing Vivian has been for you, and I don't want to push you, but I've come to cherish our time together."

"You never push, Briar. It's one of the things that's so special about you." She kept her cheek pressed against Briar's chest using the warm surface to find the strength to finish what she had to say. "I want you to know before we go any further that I'll always miss Vivian. We spent years together and I loved her. I don't know why she was taken away so soon, but I have to think that she'd be happy for me that I found you. You've helped me more than anyone in seeing that there is a future for me." She turned her face up and smiled when Briar released her hair from the pins holding it up. "A future that I hope you are going to be a big part of if that makes you happy in return."

"I just want a chance."

"And I just want you to hold me," said Megan. The arms around her waist tightened just enough to make her feet come off the ground. "Let's go inside where it's more comfortable."

Briar kissed her one more time before turning her around and pointing her in the direction of the stairs. When Megan opened the door Mac was sitting there waiting for them, running directly for Briar once he spotted her. She shed her jacket and tossed it over a chair before stooping to pick him up and pet him.

"Since you have company for the moment, I'm going to change into something more comfortable," said Megan as she scratched under Mac's chin. "I bought some new flavored water for you. It's in the fridge if you want one. I promise I won't be long."

The pictures on the refrigerator door had been thinned considerably in the summer months, as Megan began putting them away in albums to preserve the memories. It was all that white space that made the new addition being held up with a magnet from the bank that made Briar stop before pulling the door open. If someone had punched her in the gut it wouldn't have made the air come rushing out as fast.

"This can't be happening to me." She pulled the envelope off and took the letter out. It was stupid to check but she had to know for sure that it was her own handwriting she'd find inside.

Her mother was right. If her new heart carried old memories from the donor its what had brought her here. What she knew for sure though, was that the feelings she had for Megan were hers alone and not something left over from Vivian. Once Megan found out exactly how she was connected to her dead lover, she was also sure that her feelings would change.

"I love her, Mac, and I'm going to lose her over something I had no control over."

She put the letter back where she found it and put Mac back down on his bed. He licked her hand before she could move away as if trying to comfort her because he'd understood what she said.

"Did you say something?" said Megan. She had put on an old pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and had brushed out her hair.

"Just talking to the dog. Listen, honey, it's getting late and I don't want to keep you up."

"Are you all right? You look exhausted all of a sudden." Enjoying her newfound freedom to touch Briar, she put her hand on her neck when she moved closer.

"Just a little bit. If you give me a rain check on tonight, I promise I'll take you out to breakfast first thing in the morning."

They kissed at the door and Briar couldn't help but think this would be the last time Megan was so open with her. The last time she'd want to be held like this from the one person who had benefited so much from Vivian's death.

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Briar sat outside in the dark brooding over what she saw as the unfairness of life as she twirled a small piece of rope Mac had left behind. When she heard the soft footsteps behind her she didn't turn around since she knew it wasn't Megan.

"Didn't have a good time tonight?" Rueben took the seat next to her and put his feet up on the chaise she was using. "It's a shame if you didn't since you two make such a good looking

couple."

"We had a great time, that's not the problem."

"So there is a problem. Sometimes it's best to just spit it out and get it behind you. I'm a good listener if you want to go that route." She looked at him with so much anguish on her face that he reached for her hand. "Please tell me and let me help you with some of that weight."

"In March of this year I had a massive heart attack," she started with no hesitation. It was a good way to work up to telling Megan, and she had to tell her. There was no way for her to hide the scar on her chest forever.

Briar told him the whole story from the surgery to the recovery, ending with finding the letter she'd written to the family of the donor. All the while the words were coming out in a monotonous tone, she started to work the rope in different loops and knots not really thinking about what she was doing. He never interrupted her and sighed heavily when she was done.

"Vivian was a really nice girl," he paused as if trying to choose his words carefully. "She was crazy about Megan and I think overall they were really happy."

"Should I get up and fetch a big stick for you to beat me with while you tell me this story?"

"Let me finish. I thought they were happy, and from what they could see, they probably thought they were happy too. Since you came here though, I've been watching Megan and how she is when she's with you. Vivian was her first love, but I think you're who she's been waiting for." He leaned over and put his hand over her heart. "Vivian made it possible for you to survive in here, but you're the one who's brought Megan's heart to life."

"And if I tell her the story I just told you?"

He leaned back and closed his eyes. The same frustration he felt when one of his students asked him a question he couldn't answer came back to him. "I can't answer that for you, Briar, but you have to tell her. You two can't have a future built on a lie of omission."

"I can trade in the millions and never break a sweat, but I have to say having that conversation with her terrifies me."

"Do you care about her?" asked Rueben.

Briar looked him in the eye and smiled. "I love her and I don't think I wanted to admit that to myself until tonight."

"Then you owe her the truth."

"Thanks for listening." She walked him to the dock and waved him goodnight. Before going in she picked up the suit jacket and went to put Mac's simple toy down. It was then she noticed



what she'd done to it. Instead of dropping it on the deck where Mac would find it, she slipped it into the jacket pocket and went to bed.

Not much into praying, she hoped that Megan would listen to her in the morning and be able to look past what their reality was. It was all she had. What she didn't know was if it was enough?

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"You should've slept in, baby. You still look tired." Megan put her hands on Briar's shoulders the next morning and almost laughed at how pleased Briar seemed at the use of the endearment.

"I am a little bit, but I wanted to be awake when you came over this morning."

"Miss me?" She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Briar's cheek.

"I sure did. Sit with me a minute?"

Megan did as she asked and sat so they were facing each other joining Briar on her chaise. "Do you regret last night? The things we admitted to each other?" It was as if suddenly the fear of the unknown wrapped its hands around her throat and was choking the good feelings out of her.

"I want nothing more than to be with you, so no, I have no regrets. I just have something to say and I need you to listen." To be fair so Megan wouldn't be put in the position to have to pull away from her, Briar let go of her hands. "I'm the person who received Vivian's heart." After all the ways she'd practiced it, the blunt truth was the best way she could think to deliver the news. The approach had worked well for her in business.

"What did you say?"

She'd been right in that Megan pulled away from her leaning back as if in horror, but she didn't get up. Not yet anyway. "The letter on your refrigerator is from me. You have to believe me when I tell you that I didn't know when I came here and got to know you. I hope this doesn't change anything between us, but when I saw that envelope last night, I had to tell you."

It took a long while for the shock to sink in and Megan just sat there curling and uncurling her fingers. Finally she put her hands on the collar of Briar's shirt and pulled it apart a little. It was enough for her to see the scar and face the reality of her words.

Without saying anything else, she stood up and shook her head when Briar went to follow. She walked back to her place and slammed the door behind her. Mac just stood on the dock swiveling his head from one floating home to the other not knowing what to do.

As tempted as he was to go to Briar who was sitting with her head in her hands, he finally moved to go through the doggy door and back to Megan. There was no angry exchange but the finality of the situation hung in the air just as clearly as if there had been. What had started as something promising had ended like the soft waves that came to shore on the lake.

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Her calls were finished and the small bag was packed and ready to go within the hour. Briar's legs felt like lead as she made her way across to Rueben's place. She found him inside making breakfast and was pleasantly surprised when he came over and gave her a hug as soon as he realized from her face how her talk with Megan had gone.

"I came to ask you for a favor."

With his hands still on her shoulders for support he nodded. "Anything you need, you know you just have to ask."

"It's nothing you'll have to sell your soul for. I just need a ride to the airport."

"You're leaving? Briar, you can't work it out with her if your more than a thousand miles away."

She patted his side before she took a seat at his small kitchen table. "If there's one lesson life teaches us, it's that some things can't be worked out. As a retired teacher you should know that. There are impossible math problems, the secrets of space and a slew of other things we'll never know for sure. For me it won't be anything so complicated."

"What do you mean?"

The sigh was released in the direction of Megan's home, which Briar could see from where she was sitting. All the windows were closed and the lights were off, but she knew Megan was still in there. "Simple. She lost her partner in an accident and it doesn't matter how much she cares about me or thinks that she does, the fact that I received Vivian's heart is something she'll never get passed."

"With time, Briar..."

"No, my friend, no amount of time is going to fix this. It's like a bad stock. When you know for certain that it isn't going to turn around, it's best to walk away and take your losses up front."

"Megan isn't a stock." He stood with his hands on his hips and sounded more than aggravated with her.

"No she isn't, but she isn't going to come around either. I have a life to go back to and that's what I'm going to do. It's going to be hard and I'm going to miss you, and it's going to hurt like hell for a very long time that she isn't in my life, but it's something I have to accept."

He didn't move but he did soften his voice. "Just promise me you won't forget about her or give up on her."

"I'm going back because it's the life I know, Rueben. Not because I want to give up on her. If I

thought there was a chance that she would change her mind, I'd stay as long as it took."

Megan never saw Briar and Rueben walking to the jeep as she sat on her sofa and cried with the letter she now knew Briar had sent clutched to her chest. It was as if Briar had ripped open the wound of losing Vivian all over again by telling her what she had that morning.

When she did look out the window nothing looked different. The jeep was parked in the same place and Rueben was coming out of Briar's place after what she assumed was their regular morning visit. School started in a week and that gave her plenty of time to think about how to face Briar again. Or decide if she even wanted to face Briar again.

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The month of September and most of October went by, and Megan noticed that the jeep would be parked in different spots in their small lot so she figured Briar was just being kind and avoiding her, waiting for her to be ready to talk. Having the kids start to get excited about Halloween since she had them making decorations for their classroom made her days more tolerable.

Just like when she'd first lost Vivian, the routine and the constant dealings with her students had helped her take her mind off of Briar and the pain of not having her in her life. "Hell, Megan when it comes to Briar that was your own choice," she said to herself as she pulled into the lot at home after school one day.

For once the white jeep wasn't there but she saw it pull in right behind her. She suddenly felt both horrible and happy at the same time. Horrible for not having the guts to talk to Briar sooner than this, but happy that circumstance finally had done what she couldn't. What she wasn't expecting was seeing Rueben sitting behind the wheel. He had also been someone she'd avoided knowing how close he'd become to Briar.

"Hey, Rueben, getting to drive Briar's car today?"

"Actually it's mine now. I was just out picking up my medicine."

She grabbed her bag and joined him for the walk down the dock. "Did Briar decide to walk from here on out?"

"She went home, Megan. Since she flew, she didn't have use for the jeep anymore so she gave it to me because I refused to take any rent from her." He felt bad for being so blunt when he saw the look of hurt cross her face, but it also gave him encouragement that Megan would finally own up to her feelings.

"She's gone?"

"Girl, did you think she was sitting in there pining away for you?" He led her to the houseboat he had lent to Briar and sat her on the chaise on the deck. "She left not long after the day you two

talked and she told you what had happened to her."

"I just couldn't handle it, Rueben. I know you think I'm probably an idiot but it's Vivian we're talking about."

"You know what I think."

She shook her head and tried not to think about how the chair she was sitting on felt when she'd shared it with Briar. "If you want to tell me off, go ahead. I know that you and Briar got close."

"This doesn't have anything to do with Briar." He pointed to the sailboat Vivian had loved so much. "I liked Vivian a lot. Thought you two made a cute couple as a matter of fact, but she was an easy one to figure out. She loved you and she loved that boat. Not much else caught her fancy and there's nothing wrong with that."

"I was thinking of selling it but I haven't been able to bring myself to not seeing it in the mornings when I leave."

Rueben put a hand over hers and the other under her chin so she'd look up at him. "I'm not questioning what you and Vivian had so please don't take what I'm about to say the wrong way. When my wife Joan was alive, there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't feel passionate about her. She was the person I worked hard for, tried to make a home for and loved with all my heart."

"It sounds like you still miss her," said Megan leaning into his touch.

"I do and I always will, just like a small part of you will always miss Vivian. What I wanted to say though, is that I never saw you look as happy with her as you did with Briar. Briar who loved art, who loved to see your face light up with something she wanted to show you and who did her best to find things you two could share." He felt bad when her eyes watered at what he was saying, but he kept on going now that he'd started. "I'm sure once you learned all about her, you'd find out that Briar has her own sailboat somewhere..."

"She can't swim so I doubt it."

He laughed and pressed his fingers against her lips. "I meant it as a metaphor, Megan. What I mean is she has something in her life that has nothing to do with you, the something she's passionate about that you never will be."

"So what's the difference then?"

"The difference is she'd give that up to keep putting those smiles on your face. You have to admit that Vivian wouldn't have given up that boat so easily, and she never did try to branch out to try and enjoy the things you do. Those things you enjoy so much and gave up for so long to make her happy."

"Don't you think it's weird that she has Viv's heart?"

"Before I answer that let me ask you something. Aren't you glad Briar's alive? No matter how that came to be, aren't you glad?"

The same paralysis that had come over her the last time she'd talked to Briar took over Megan's throat and she couldn't find a word that she could get out. Rueben was nice and stood pulling her up with him.

"Come on. Come help me box up some stuff Briar left behind. I have a feeling in my bones she's not gone forever and I want them to be here when she gets back. Some of the other things she told me to give away."

The inside of the place was neat, but Briar had left some things behind. On the table there was a stack of papers that had notes on them about different stocks she was following along with her laptop, closed and left as a gift for Rueben. Besides that the only other thing she'd left was hanging in the closet. The seersucker suit she'd bought because Megan had wanted her to had been abandoned.

"Do you have room for it at your place, or do you want me to give it to charity?" asked Rueben.

"I'll take it if you don't mind."

She went home after that and sat on the sofa holding the suit, pressing it to her face. Even after hanging in the closet for all that time there were still some traces of Briar's cologne. "Dammit this isn't fair. All I asked you for is a sign, Viv, and sending me someone who got your heart wasn't what I was expecting."

Mac caught the same scent she was enjoying and started barking as if Briar was going to walk in any minute. When he moved close he realized it was coming from the thing in his mom's hands. He jumped up and sunk his teeth into the jacket trying to pull it away from her and carry it to his bed like he often did with things he found and enjoyed.

"No, Mac." Megan pulled back to keep it away from him not knowing what a good grip he had on it. One good tug and the pocket ripped dropping the contents on her lap.

She looked at it and could almost hear Vivian whispering in her ear. "*You asked me for a sign and here it is. What you decide to do with it is up to you.*"

As an answer she picked up the phone and started making plans. It might be too late but she was going to try.

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"Briar, do you need anything else?" asked Shelia. More often than not since her boss had come back she'd come in and find her in the same position looking out the window with a dazed expression.

"I'm sorry, I thought I told you to get out of here hours ago. It's Friday, beautiful, go home and have fun with your partner."

Not needing an invitation she stepped into the office and closed the door. "Are you all right? Do you feel okay?"

"I feel fine...really," she finished when she received an expression of doubt. "I'm even going to Long Island this weekend to spend some time with my mother."

"You must be feeling funny if you're going to see Henley voluntarily."

"Halloween is on Monday and you know how much fun she plans for everyone. I'm just going as the hired help believe me."

"Have fun then. Now I can relax this weekend and not be so worried about you." She noticed the sound machine she'd given Briar was turned on to the sound of waves again. "Ever since you got back from your extended vacation I've been concerned that there was something wrong."

"Nothing time and hard work won't cure. Go on and get out of here."

Briar walked Shelia out and put her in a cab. After the trip down south she'd come to enjoy the freedom of driving herself, and when she was going out of the city as she had often to visit her mother, she had her new car brought around. This time she'd gone with the Toyota Sequoia. The bags she'd packed for the weekend were thrown in the back so she was ready to go.

The congestion of the city was left behind as she got closer to the house her parents had shared for years before her birth and where she'd grown up. After her father's death, Henley had opened it to a local organization that worked with mentally and physically handicapped children for certain events. Her Halloween parties had become legendary since the kids ran from one activity to the other until they were completely exhausted.

When she arrived the grounds were being prepared for the onslaught of visitors that they'd have over the next three days. Henley was right in the middle of all the activity but broke away when she saw Briar pull up.

"I swear I'd give you permission to smoke a cigar if you promised to put on some weight. I know the doctor told you to watch it, but you're getting to slim, honey." She ran up and threw her arms around Briar.

"Don't remind me about my vices, mom. It's hard enough getting through the day on only one cup of coffee."

"Walk with me so I can check out all the pumpkins I ordered." She took Briar's hand pulled her in the direction of the barn. "Have you heard from Megan?"

Henley wouldn't be put off like Shelia and had pestered Briar until she heard the whole story of her adventure. The tale had her planning a wedding until Briar got to the end. As much as she wanted to as her mother, there was nothing she could do to take away the pain.

"When are you going to stop asking me that question?" asked Briar.

"When you come to your senses and try one more time to get in touch with her."

"Mother, I'm not the one who wanted to end it. Did you not understand that part of the story?"

They stopped at some bales of hay and Henley took a seat. "Don't be sarcastic with your mother, Briar Kilston."

"No, ma'am, I haven't heard from her and I'm not calling her so drop the subject." She joined Henley and plucked a strand of hay out of the bale to chew on. "I'm fine really. I'm back at work, things are going well despite the craziness of the market, and I'm reading a lot more."

"What you need is someone to love you, sweetheart."

Finding that she enjoyed showing Henley affection, Briar reached over and hugged her much to her mother's delight. "What you don't love me?"

"Enough to see you happy and *in* love."

"Some people are really lucky when it comes to that like you and daddy. Maybe the rest of us should settle for being content."

"Never settle for anything or anyone, Briar. That was your father's motto and the reason I loved him so much."

"Right now I'll settle for a bowl of your vegetable soup," teased Briar ready to end the conversation.

They walked back to the house and spent the rest of the evening in the kitchen then in the den in front of the large fireplace. The next morning Briar got up wanting to take one of the horses out for a run and Henley sent her off with a kiss on the cheek and a warning to be careful. They had the same conversation every time Briar came over and repeated it the next two mornings when Henley sent her off with a kiss on the cheek.

Henley was helping the staff make caramel apples for the kids arriving in a few hours when one of the servants came into the kitchen. "Henley, there's someone here who'd like to see you."

"Is it someone from Hope Kids?"

"She didn't give her name, so I put her in Mr. Carlson's study."

"I'm Henley Kilston, can I help you?" she asked when she walked in.

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am, but I didn't know where to start."

"What's the old adage? At the beginning I believe is the best place," she pointed to a leather chair near the window where the young woman was standing.

"I'm Megan Beniot and I'm here about your daughter."

"My daughter told me about you Ms. Beniot and I have to say it's a surprise to find you in my home."

Megan squeezed the handle of her purse and took a deep breath. "I'm sure she told you how badly I behaved and I'm here to ask your help in finding her so I can apologize. What I did to Briar was unbelievably rude and I owe it to her to say I'm sorry. If I'm lucky she'll still be interested in being my friend."

"Can I tell you a few things about Briar before we talk about you seeing her?" Henley relaxed into her seat and studied the young woman she was more than sure that Briar was in love with.

"It's your right to tell me anything at all, ma'am."

"Please call me Henley and I should offer you something to drink since I have a feeling we'll be here awhile."

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Earlier this year I almost lost my only child to a heart that was broken because of genetics. In the last two months I've lost the child I knew to another broken heart, only this time a transplant won't cure what ails her. You hurt her and I want to know why?"

"Because I was an idiot and was drowning in guilt," said Megan. For the first time she voiced the thoughts she'd had the night before Vivian died and how she had wanted something more even when her partner was alive.

Henley moved closer and put her hand on Megan's knee. "Tell me about your Vivian."

For over an hour Megan told her about the life she'd shared with Vivian and how it had ended so tragically. For good measure she told Henley about the time she and Briar had spent together and how much she'd enjoyed it.

"It sounds to me like the one thing you treasured about Vivian was her true heart, but Briar is a better fit for you." Megan nodded at the assessment. "I knew from the time she was a baby that when she gave her heart away it would be to the most special of people. She's so much like her father that way. Once they commit it's a lifetime promise, Megan, I hope you understand that."



"I want nothing more than that."

"Then how lucky for you that Briar has given away the one heart that you treasure so much."

"You think it's that easy?" asked Megan.

"Things that are meant to be usually are." Henley stood up and took Megan with her. "Want a tour of the grounds?"

Megan wanted Henley to just tell her where Briar was but she didn't want to be rude by rushing her. "Sure, I'd love to."

"Trust me, Megan. I want you to see the grounds and then you'll hopefully come to realize what I did a long time ago when Carlson first brought me here."

"What's that?"

"No matter where you decide to live, this is the Kilston family home and it's a place to make happy memories. We stayed more permanently after Briar was born even though we have a place in the city as does Briar."

They walked out the back door through the kitchen and to the fence line close to the house. There racing through the open field on a black mare was Briar. Slowing as she got closer to cool down the horse.

"No more walking away," said Henley.

"I promise."

Briar never noticed her and continued on to the barn at a slow trot. When she pulled the saddle off and turned to put it on the stall divider, it fell out of her hand when she saw Megan standing there.

"I came because I wanted to tell you..." started Megan never getting to finish when Briar just looked at her like she wanted to bolt for the house.

Briar stood her ground with a million thoughts running through her head starting with paying Megan back and just walking away and ending with just taking her in her arms and kissing her. Her heart listened to her mother and her constant wishes for her to be happy and she started walking.

At first Megan was so shocked she didn't move but quickly relaxed into the kiss Briar had initiated. "I missed you so much," said Briar, her lips so close Megan could feel them moving against her own.

"I love you, Briar, and I want you to give me a chance to prove it to you."

"Only stock tips have to be proven, honey. I know you love me because I feel it in here," said Briar tapping over her heart. "And while my heart may have some memory of you, my love for you is real and it's mine."

"Just like me." There was a rustling behind Megan and before she could go on a very small dog found the person he'd been searching for for what seemed like an eternity to him. "Both of us belong to you, Briar, and we both love you," said Megan laughing at the way Mac was trying to crawl up Briar's leg.

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That night watching a group of kids congregate around Briar, who was helping them carve a pumpkin, Megan turned her eyes to the night sky and the full moon. Her thoughts turned to Vivian but only for a moment.

*"I'll always have a special place for you in my heart and I'm never going to forget the life we had, Viv, and thank you for bringing Briar into my life. Be well and happy sailing."*

She put her arms around Briar's neck from behind and pressed into her back. Watching Briar interact with the kids made her look forward to a happy life with a person who showed such infinite patience with these special little ones.

Perhaps Briar's new heart carried some of Vivian's memories, the knot Briar had tied without really realizing what she was doing the night she talked to Rueben proved that. When Mac had ripped the pocket of the seersucker jacket it had been the sign Megan had been looking for. It was the exact same knot that Vivian had given her for her birthday the last night they spent together. What was important was that she and Briar had a lifetime to make new memories that belonged only to them.

"I love you," said Briar turning from her carving duties to kiss the tip of her nose.

"I love you too, baby." A lifetime sounded good but Megan was sure it wouldn't be enough now that she had found her one true passion. But it would do for a start.

**The End**

Comments to: [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com)